Ghost Faction

Necrospace - 4

Sean-Michael Argo

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Annotation

During an apocalyptic battle against murderous machines and hardened soldiers a lone salvage marine turns the tide with a devastating counter attack. Having revealed herself as a consummate warrior, Jada Sek is welcomed into the ranks of the Dire Swords, an elite fighting force loyal only to the contract. As the other marines return to their salvage duties Jada and her new comrades, each as haunted by the ghosts of their past as she is, plunge yet further into necrospace. They are repeatedly deployed to disrupt and destroy the endeavors of corporate competitors, and along the way discover that the enigma of the machine race is more sinister and complex than any imagined. Surrounded by the specters of an ancient holocaust and forced to face her inner conflict, Jada must make a choice. When the money ceases to matter, when surviving loses its significance, and the thrill of taking the fight right into the teeth of the enemy seems like the only truth left in this scrapyard of a universe, it is time to let the marine die so that the mercenary can be born.
From the Author Thank you for joining me in Necrospace… The adventure continues in: • Salvage Marines (Book 1) • Dead Worlds (Book 2) • Trade War (Book 3) • Ghost Faction (Book 4)* * * You might also like my other tales of war and adventure: • Gladiators vs Zombies • Wasteland Survival Guide • Black Metal: The Orc Wars • Ember Days: An Urban Fantasy Novel

- Sean-Michael Argo
  - PROLOGUE
  - 1. ANVIL BORN
  - 2. BIGGER GUNS AND BETTER PAY
  - 3. THE TRAIN JOB
  - 4. DEAD ALIVE
  - 5. DEPLOYED RESOURCES
  - 6. RAID ALPHA
  - 7. ONE FOR THE STALKER
  - 8. DIRE SWORD
  - 9. UNTIL THAT DAY
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Sean-Michael Argo
GHOST FACTION

PROLOGUE

It is the Age of The Corporation.

The common man toils under the watchful eye of the elite and their enforcers. The rules of law have long been replaced by the politics of profit. For many centuries, the Covenants of Commerce have ruled mankind, from boardroom to factory floor, from mine deep to fertile field, upon the battlefields of heart, of mind, and of distant star.

The dark ages of feudalism have returned with capitalistic ferocity. There is no peace among the stars of mapped space; business is booming.

Impoverished workers drown in debt, laboring for subsistence pay. Mercenaries of every kind wage war, loyal to the banner of any company willing to meet their price. Everyone in existence is locked in a ceaseless struggle for economic dominance and survival. Scavengers and space pirates swoop in to loot what they can from the forgotten and unprotected.

To be a human being in such times is to be one among countless billions in a civilization spread across a vast universe, all ensnared in the same blood-soaked web of capitalism, most doomed to be ground to dust amidst the gears of progress.

There are some people, however, those rare few, who rise from the ranks of the faceless masses, to make their mark upon history.

This is one such tale.

1. ANVIL BORN

The Reaper fleets had departed from Gedra Prime, set to make the long journey back to their respective home-worlds, salvaging all the way. There would be battlefields and void debris aplenty, not to mention chance conflicts with rival corporations, so there were hazard wages to be had.

Jada Sek had chosen not to say goodbye to the marines of Tango Platoon, choosing simply to file her paperwork, pay her fees, and walk away from the Reaper camp a free woman. She had gone straight to the small fortified encampment of the Dire Swords, where she was eagerly awaited by the mercs she had fought side by side with weeks before. The mercs were still based off of Gedra Prime, making sorties against various enemies at the behest of House Indron, the current signatory of their contract.

Tango Platoon had been through hell and back many times, though out of the original platoon who graduated boot camp together, only a scant handful still survived.

Jada had fought beside them, bled beside them, slept with a few of them and loved one of them. To say goodbye after all of that took a kind of strength that Jada felt she'd left in the pits of Vorhold.

Samuel Hyst had made the offer of hospitality to any who wanted to muster out and follow him to the frontier, but unsurprisingly, nobody took him up on it. Prybar had his own path to tread, and it really had never been a Grotto one. She knew that the rest of the marines were lifers until death or retirement, just like she'd planned on being, and they were willing to fight and die for the corporation, warts and all. They would understand, she told herself, they were men and women of Baen 6. Say what you will about Grotto, she thought as she forced herself not to look back at the Reaper compound, the people of this corporation could endure hardship and loss without an overabundance of sentimentality.

She had always thought of herself as strong in her own way, of body and of mind, both qualities which had lent themselves to being an exemplary soldier during her time with the Reaper Corps. She knew now that the scale against which she had measured herself and her fellow salvage marines had been a poor one indeed. Not that the marines of Tango Platoon were weak, quite the opposite, but the strength of un-enhanced human beings paled in comparison to the feats the elite warriors of the Dire Swords were capable of.

Now, assuming that she survived the gene therapy that would transform her, she would rise to their level and become a fellow sword.

And so Jada lay strapped down on a machine that she had been told was called 'The Rack,' a contraption that would deliver the requisite gene therapy. She had trusted the mercenaries, both on the prowess of their skills in the field and the promise of the data coins they had heaped upon her.

The former marine was aware of how special it was to have so many mercs awarded so many coins at once and Jada knew she had earned at least most of them.

In truth, she had wanted to die and had aggressively assaulted the alpha cyborg with something akin to suicide in her mind. Much like the first cyborg she'd fought, and many of the combat engagements since. There was always the element of a death wish in her battlefield heroics, and she had the distinct impression that it was this closeness with death that had drawn the Dire Sword's eyes to her deeds.

"Try not to die, Reaper," said Poe from the corner of the small chamber, where the boyishly handsome and exceptionally deadly mercenary leaned against the wall with his thick arms crossed over his chest. "We like you and Ranec owes you his life."

"I'm not a Reaper anymore," hissed Jada, the first waves of pain beginning to wash over her while the serum took effect, and in seconds, it was all she could do to spit out the words, "Not Grotto."

"Yeah, well you ain't a Dire Sword either, Sek," growled Womack, who even now, many hours after the fighting had ceased upon the surface of Gedra Prime, was encased in his mag-armor. "I don't care about your coins and Ranec is a careless bravo that owes plenty of folks his life. What matters is that you make the cut."

"What our esteemed commander is trying to say, in his own way, is that the gene therapy isn't just about getting a shot and waking up a meta-human." interjected an un-enhanced middle-aged man wearing a dull blue medicae jacket with the name MARIUS stenciled upon the left breast. He walked quietly into Jada's line of sight holding a datapad. "It's that while the serum performs its function, you also have a job to do."

"I'm ready," snarled Jada as she began to fight back against the horribly painful spasms that wracked her entire body, making her feel as if her nerve endings were on fire while the very fibers of her muscles unraveled and re-knit themselves every few seconds.

"The serum is going to tear your body apart and put it back together, only faster, stronger, more agile, and far more resistant to pain. To help with the rapid increase in body mass, the Rack is going to feed you enough calories and nutrition sufficient to feed a single human being for nearly a year." Marius reached out to tap the datapad, causing the Rack's angle to elevate so that Jada was nearly upright and able to see all three men without moving her already

restrained head. “Your job is to take control of your body. The exorbitant cost is not the only reason that this sort of therapy isn’t commonplace in corporate space. Forgive me for such an unquantifiable statement, but you but literally have to *will* yourself to survive.”

“The trauma of this is going to take your mind back down into the deepest and darkest places of your past, even as it breaks your body to pieces,” said Poe, his voice taking on a breathy quality that made Jada think he was actually experiencing a kind of reverence for the serum. “It’s up to you to come back; there is no shot or treatment to get you back and you’d be all but brain dead.”

“You’ve fought mech-warriors on both Tetra and Gedra Prime now, Sek, so think of it this way,” said Womack just as he turned to leave the chamber, finishing by saying over his shoulder, “Your body is about to become a war machine, but you’re going to have to learn how to drive it, otherwise you’ll never get up from that table again.”

Jada’s eyes filled with tears as another wave of pain slammed into her body, causing it to surge against the restraints. She whimpered, her mind lost to the pain, and then she growled and fought against the renewed surges of her muscles as they violently resisted their own destruction.

There had only been one time that Jada had felt so helpless against the trauma of still being alive and that was in the dark pits of Vorhold. The former marine had always thought that a part of her died back there, in the dark embrace of the stalkers. In some ways, that dead part of her had empowered her to be a more fearsome soldier, giving her the will to make harder choices, the nihilistic resolve to endure and overcome.

The thoughts of Vorhold began to overpower her conscious mind, and in an instant, she realized the truth in Poe’s warnings. Suddenly, Deepspire and the horrors of that place were all she could think about, so much so that only the pain in her body kept her from accepting the nightmares as reality. The stalker’s hands were on her body, their fetid breath hot against her skin, and the smell of blood and gunsmoke filled her nostrils. All that she could perceive was the horror and the pain, yet as the violence and depravity worsened, the pain itself seemed ever more distant.

The *pain*.
The *pain* was *real*.
Focus on the *pain*.
Survive the *pain*.
Pain is *survival*.
Pain is *life*.

She was back on Gedra Prime.

She had earned more duty coins in that single battle than anyone in Tango Platoon over the course of a career. She had been reckless, vengeful even, in her conduct on the field that day.

When the Folken counter-attacked, she had been separated from the rest of Squad Marsters and unknowingly been driven by the slaughter towards where the Dire Swords would eventually make their assault drop. True to their method of war, the mercs had been executing lightning attacks against the Gedra inside the necropolis, stirring them up and drawing them into attacking the rear of Helion's fighting positions.

At first, when the Folken appeared on the battlefield, it seemed as if all was lost as the heavy elite infantry tore into the Grotto forces. Jada had been desperately defending a small section of trench alongside two Indron stormtroopers when she witnessed the Dire Swords lock horns with the Folken, and it had been like watching a hurricane grapple with a volcano. In retrospect, it was this brawl with the Folken that had left enough Dire Swords dead on the field that there were positions to fill with new recruits.

Jada and the two stormtroopers fought on while the mercs ripped into each other even as the alpha cyborg appeared and the hollow horde began to rise and attack everyone, regardless of corporate affiliation.

Their defense of that last ditch had been tenacious and eventually both stormtroopers lay dead and Jada was out of ammunition. She scavenged the remaining ammo drums from her slain corporate comrades and hefted an autocannon, which revealed itself to be devastating against the hollows at such close range.

Somewhere in the chaos, she had caught a glimpse of the cyborg and all of the rage and grief that she had endured up to that point suddenly had a face.

Jada realized that this was the real turning point for her, when the money ceased to matter and surviving became something of a secondary concern. The thrill of taking the fight right into the teeth of the enemy seemed like the only truth left in this scrapyard of a universe.

Jada had rushed the cyborg, hurling tube charges she'd found on the body of a Helion trooper into the first clutch of hollows that rose to defend their leader. The salvage marine cut her way through the hollows with the autocannon, heedless of the wounds she took or the impossible odds she faced. She was focused on the goal, committed to complete this act regardless of whether or not she died doing so, and that made her deadly in the extreme.

When the autocannon went dry, she tackled a hollow and ripped the Helion battle rifle from its pale hands before smashing its skull in with the butt of the weapon. As soon as she was back on her feet, she charged the alpha cyborg. It had positioned itself near a shattered Helion tank as it directed its re-animated shambling soldiers to defend it.

Jada noticed that she was being flanked by a Dire Sword on either side of her. They ran incredibly fast, outpacing her in seconds and she realized that they were joining her in the assault.

The Dire Swords leapt into combat against the mechanical beast. As one blasted the shield, the other, a grim, skull-faced warrior with a large knife affixed to his chest moved in for a close-quarters kill.

At the last moment, the cyborg, revealing much more prowess in battle than the cyborg Jada had faced in the past, surged forward and used its energy shield to knock over the Dire Sword and shoot at it. It had drawn the mercs in and lowered its shield just in time to rake a clawed hand across the chest of the charging merc even as he slammed his knife into the creature's side.

Jada saw her moment and knew what was about to come, so she dove into the fray, heedless of the fact that she only had a slim chance of not being immediately killed. The cyborg activated its matter displacement weapon, and the deadly orbs she'd encountered in the past annihilated the Dire Sword shooter. Jada slammed her shoulder into the body of the wounded Dire Sword, who was already struggling to his feet, saving him from the orb that would have disintegrated his head had she not acted.

From her prone position, while the beast's shield was still down, Jada opened up with the Helion battle rifle and pumped the creature full of hot rounds. While her single salvo was not enough to kill it, her attack had given other Dire Swords enough time to engage, and in moments, more mercs were pouring on the firepower. She lent her firepower to theirs as they shorted out the cyborg's shield and the combined storm of projectiles reduced it to slag moments before its control module ignited. The meltdown knocked Jada to the ground, and she blacked out momentarily, only to return to consciousness as the Dire Sword she would come to know as Womack offered her a hand to help her rise to her feet.

Jada's eyes snapped open and she saw that she was alone in the chamber. Her body was drenched in sweat, and her eyes felt sticky, as if she'd not opened them in a long time. The pain was there, a dull companion, though not so unbearable that she could not think clearly and assess her surroundings. The Rack was making a low beeping sound, and she was able to see with her peripheral vision that both

the serum and the nutrient cocktail canisters were empty.

Moments later, the door slid open to reveal Marius, with Poe only a few steps behind him.

“You’ve done excellent work,” said Marius as he observed his datapad, before gesturing towards something out of Jada’s line of sight. “Poe, would you set fresh canisters in the Rack please?”

“Where did the serum take you?” asked Poe as he slapped in a fresh canister of nutrient cocktail, lifting the heavy item with so little effort that even Marius seemed taken aback for a moment. “I spent most of my transformation back on Torrid Mons, fighting one of the Fenrir gun cults.”

“You fought in the Torrid Uprising?” asked Jada in a shaky voice as Poe stepped back to allow Marius to type on the control pad of the Rack. “That was forty-seven years ago; you don’t look a day over twenty.”

“That’s the serum’s doing. Once the body acclimatizes to its new state, the ravages of aging are dramatically reduced,” answered Marius as he locked in another canister of serum. “It’s another reason that the serum’s ninety-six point two five mortality rate is both a blessing and a curse. That’s why we have such a robust support staff, nearly ten to one. Many who have the coins to join do not necessarily have a high probability of surviving the treatments. In a way of speaking, you could say it’s just as much about luck as it is about desire.”

Both of the men grew silent after the medicae’s comment, and Jada took a deep breath as she did her best to relax her body. They all stood in silence for a moment, before the young woman spoke.

“Vorhold. I spent months underground, fighting every hostile we could find, and eventually, I was captured by something we called the Stalker. The man I was going to marry died during my rescue, his name was George Tuck,” said Jada, an edge of steel creeping into her voice as she noticed the next canister of serum beginning to glow while the Rack spun up for another cycle. “Then I was on Gedra Prime, earning my coins. How long was I under? Felt like weeks.”

“No, Jada,” said Marius as he depressed the action on the Rack, causing the hypodermic needles from the serum and the nutrient cocktail to pierce the young woman’s flesh again, and as they began pumping her full of fluids once more, he added, “One night cycle.”

“How many more?” asked Jada in a strained voice as her body began to react violently to the serum.

Marius stood up to leave, looking at Poe for a moment before he turned and left. The warrior walked over to Jada and placed his hand in hers. She involuntarily gripped his hand, squeezing it so hard because of the spasms that even with his enhanced flesh, the man

grimaced with pain.

"This will be the next six weeks of your life," answered Poe with a look of sincere concern in his eyes, "And if you die, know that it would have been an honor fighting at your side. Your deeds on Gedra Prime were beyond impressive, and as you return to Vorhold, please know that every man and woman among us is pulling for you."

Jada was unable to answer, as her lips had pulled back across her teeth from seizures in her face. Her body strained against the bindings of the Rack and Poe looked at her for a moment longer before leaving.

The former marine lost sight of Poe and in his place stood the Stalker in the Dark.

It continued like that for what seemed to Jada's individual perspective as years, so long and excruciating was her ordeal that over and over she had to summon up every last scrap of willpower she possessed just to stay sane. The pain was her anchor, and soon, she began to use that pain as a weapon against her hallucinations, continuously bringing herself back to the intense suffering of reality.

It was a natural reaction of the mind to retreat from full awareness of the body during acute trauma. Jada began to understand that it was this mental mastery of her body's instinctual reactions that the others had been encouraging her to strive for.

She had no idea when it happened, but as the most recent serum injection's effects peaked, Jada realized that she was so effortlessly focused on the pain that she suffered no hallucinations at all. In spite of her body's desire to retreat into fantasy and unconsciousness, she held herself in a conscious and focused state.

The former marine flexed different muscles in her body, and though she was still bound to the table, she could feel the very power within them, how much more muscular she was than when she first lay upon the table.

The scents and sounds of the simple room positively assaulted her awareness, and she had to work to filter out the noise and to focus upon what she chose. For hours she worked at it, and eventually managed to reach a point where she could consciously affect how much raw input she was receiving from the plainly furnished chamber. Perhaps that was part of why they put so little in the room with her, thought Jada once she was been able to harness this newfound perceptive prowess.

After the next serum treatment, she found that managing the pain was second nature and pushing the pain aside took only a small portion of her attention. With her pain internally managed, she was able to delve deeply into her new senses.

She discovered that Marius had moved several items around, nothing important, just a few bits of rubbish, his datapad, and a few of

the potted plants that were kept on board ship to keep the air somewhat more filtered. He had been testing her, she realized, just to see how much attention to detail she was capable of handling while also managing her pain.

Finally, without warning, Marius entered the room with Poe, who seemed rather excited to see her.

"Jada," said Marius, his usually impassive face revealing a thin smile of satisfaction, "You have completed the full battery of injections and the first stage of your gene therapy is complete."

"What's the second stage?" asked Jada, not wishing to make small talk, "More injections?"

"You're all done with that," Poe replied, beaming as he helped Marius unfasten Jada's bonds and help the woman shakily to her feet. "Now comes the fun part, combat training."

"Your body is nothing like you remember, and given the fact that you spent your entire life in your former body, this new one will require some getting used to," stated Marius as Jada leaned on him slightly so that she could regain her balance after so many weeks of laying prone. "Please see for yourself."

Jada allowed Marius and Poe to help her walk to a full-body mirror, and she saw herself for the first time in weeks.

The former marine had kept her mocha-colored skin and jet black hair, even her yellow-tinged eyes, the result of living so close to a sulphurite refinery back on Baen 6, but as she looked closer, she could see that she was positively rippling with tightly corded muscles, so much so that she was straining the surface tension of her jumpsuit. For a moment, she experienced a tinge of modesty at how fully displayed her anatomy was as it pushed against the fabric.

It was then that she realized that she now stood an inch or so taller than Poe, who weeks before had looked down at her, even without his armor.

Jada started to realize that it wasn't so much that they had changed *who* she was, more that they had used their technology to make her more of what she *already* was.

Without her honed soldier's body as a starting point, the therapy would have torn a civilian to pieces. Without years of experience with the horrors of war, her mind would have unraveled completely and she'd have been left a comatose shell. No wonder civilians, even the rich ones, were not flocking to this double-edged miracle of science and technology, thought Jada, as she marveled at herself.

The former marine knew that she had been turned into a living weapon, and the thought of that was both terribly exciting and somehow melancholy, as now there was absolutely no returning to civilian life. Not that she'd ever had any intention of doing so; she had

been intent on being a Reaper for life, even after falling in love with Tuck. The only difference now, after the fighting on Gedra Prime, was that she could pursue a higher form of warfare as a member of the Merchants Militant.

"I don't think my hand will really fit the old Grotto combat rifle anymore," breathed Jada as she pushed gently away from the two men to stand on her own, before holding her hand up to her face to clench it into a fist while she looked sideways at Poe. "Time to get some bigger guns."

Poe smiled at Jada and saluted her in the Dire Sword way by pressing his fist to his opposite shoulder before saying, "The arms and armor of the recent slain, by tradition, are passed to the newest recruits. Guns you will have, Jada, welcome to the Dire Swords."

2. BIGGER GUNS AND BETTER PAY

The pain never went away. It stayed with a Dire Sword for the rest of their lives, even for veteran mercs who survived long enough to retire and had long since stopped taking the routine booster treatments.

In order to thrive in her modified body, Jada had to make peace with that pain and learn to manage it through meditation and breathing exercises.

For weeks after the treatments ended, she was confined to living quarters adjacent to the med bay. Poe insisted it was rather small and threadbare compared to the private quarters she would enjoy once fully initiated into the mercenary company. Jada found that the small chamber suited her just fine for the time being.

She was raised Grotto and hailed from a habitation sector that was grim even for the likes of Baen 6. Her entire family had called a chamber not much larger than this home for the entirety of Jada's childhood.

Hama Sek, her father, had insisted that saving on living expenses would enable their family to work against the life-bonds of the three children more effectively. The trick was to pay down the principle rapidly until the scales of interest balanced out. It was a plan common in the hab sectors that surrounded the gigantic sulphurite refinery and throughout the poorer communities of Grotto Corporation as a whole. If one could achieve the 'debt balance' then, though they might never pay off the debt and would perpetually remain impoverished by it, the payment would at least be manageable.

Everyone was really just trying to avoid the stiff fines and jail-time in the local enforcer's spire for non-payment or, worse yet, an off-world prison sentence for full default. It was a serviceable plan, though one that did not leave enough in savings or disposable income for the average citizen to handle health emergencies, habitation tax re-districting, or family members in need. So delicate was the mathematical balancing act that one misstep would usually end with severe consequences. It was no coincidence that the poorest and most desperate of Grotto's population also had the highest instance of debt crime.

Jada Sek, once a veteran Reaper and now a licensed mercenary in the esteemed ranks of the Merchants Militant, had come a long way from the polluted stacks of Baen 6. However, as she breathed in and out the way Poe had shown her, starting at the base of her spine and letting her lungs fill to their maximum potential, there seemed to be a tinge of sulphurite in the air.

At first, Jada thought it a real scent, and then she recognized it as another one of the minor hallucinations, in this case olfactory, that haunted every Dire Sword. The price for their superhuman bodies was a life spent on the knife's edge, physically and mentally. Jada felt it was logical that it would be so. Her years traveling the universe had shown her that more often than not, all things had a return and a hard return at that.

She had sent the majority of her marine pay back to her two brothers. Her mother had passed away not long after Jada had become a Reaper and her father, Hama, refused her help. Hama Sek was a proud man, and she supposed he had some reason for that.

When Hama was young, he struggled with his work assignment, and much like the stories of her former comrade, Ben Takeda, before he became a Reaper for life, the young Sek was a malcontent and a brawler. Unlike her former comrade, Hama crossed the enforcers of the spire and was sent to an off-world penal colony.

One elite house or another made arrangements with the colony and Hama was pressed into a penal legion. He served for two years as battle fodder, sent into the jaws of wild combat time after time, and somehow, against all odds, he managed to survive. Of the seven hundred men and women pressed into service, only Hama and forty others survived to fulfill the 'combat rehabilitation' terms of their agreement. Most of the others, predictably, some might even argue by Grotto design, were unable to successfully re-integrate into the Baen workforce and so ended up back in prison.

Hama, on the other hand, had kept his record clean, put his head down, and got to work. That work gave him a family, and even if they were perpetually teetering on the edge of financial ruin, for her father, it beat the alternative.

Jada thought of her brothers, and for a brief moment, the stench of the sulphurite once again filled her nose. They had died in a refinery accident along with her father and several hundred others in their habitation sector, one of the largest industrial tragedies in Baen 6 history.

When Jada had gone Downspire with Tango Platoon, her brothers were alive and happily spending her hard-earned marine pay on not nearly enough of their life-bond principles, and when she emerged, her brothers were dead.

She really did lose everything in the darkness of Vorhold, thought Jada, as she allowed the pain of her body and the sting of the memory to wash over her, pass through her, and fade away beyond her.

She suddenly realized that she carried a sort of pride in her yellow eyes. Where once it had been something she felt ashamed of, as it marked her as being from the poorest of the poor, not a single one

of her Reaper comrades had ever given voice to the fact. That was her Grotto upbringing combining with the pain and hallucinations to rob her of her focus, to test her resolve, and Jada continued her exercises in order to breathe it away.

Jada breathed in a lungful of air that would have been sharp with the cold had she not been sealed inside her helmet. The merc opened her eyes to take in the full view of the frozen valley below. The surface of this planet was covered in ashes that fell from the sky in a light breeze, vomited up from the volcanoes and cracks of the surface of the troubled world.

Jada recalled from the mission brief that it was believed that the planet's geo-thermal instability was due to intrusive mining on a mind-numbingly large scale, far beyond the capacity of known human technology. The merc knew it had to have been a truly massive operation for it to dwarf humanity's capacity for planetary ruination. Where humans stripped what they could from claimed planets, whoever had exploited this world, like countless others on this side of the Ellisian Line, had fundamentally upset the physical equilibrium of everything.

As she stood on the rock outcropping overlooking the ashen valley below, Jada could feel, thanks to her advanced body, the subtle shifts in gravity and spin as the planet careened through its tight orbit.

The cold temperatures on the planet were due to the dying sun that had all but burned to embers. It hung in the sky, vast enough to cover half the horizon with its dirty brown bulk. The other six planets in the system were just as dead as the sun. Most of them were frozen wastelands, as quiet as they were cold.

No signs of current or former civilization had been discovered by long-range scanners and cursory scout recons. To date, at least according to available intelligence, none of the plundered worlds had revealed anything of the sort. If other civilizations had existed on these worlds, their presence there had been wiped away completely, or were so beyond human that signs of their existence were all but invisible. Only the tomb-worlds seemed untouched by whatever weapon of devastation had swept across this part of the universe, leaving maelstrom wracked planets and silent grave cities in its wake.

"Jada," said Poe as he walked up behind her, so quiet despite his mag-armor that the merc might not have noticed him had her own physical senses not been so enhanced, "It's time."

Jade turned to look at Poe. His face, like hers and all the other Dire Swords, was hidden behind the grinning skull engraved onto his faceplate. She had learned quickly to tell each of the warriors apart based on the unique features of the skulls, as they were all acid-etched

representations of the individual's actual skull.

The Dire Swords were a practical lot, sharing weapons, equipment, and armor at will without much notion of ownership, but the helmets were the single item that belonged solely to the individual.

"Okay, battle buddy," said Jada as she rose up from her crouched position on the ledge and turned to mount her tactical ATV, "Let's go do some damage."

Poe laughed quietly behind his skull face, and though Jada couldn't see him clearly, she had learned after weeks of rigorous one-on-one training how to read his body language. The mag-armor was bulky and did much to render each merc somewhat indistinguishable from the other, but there was a certain bounce in his shoulders that gave him away.

The Dire Swords did not indulge in the kind of soldier's banter that Jada was used to. These mercs were beyond conscription or servitude and the sort of gallows humor such circumstances instigated. Still, it seemed that Womack had chosen well in pairing Jada with Poe, as their personalities and fighting techniques complemented each other. If she could find something to laugh about, considering the ghosts and nightmares she was burdened to carry, then damned if at least one of the mercs could too, so Poe would do.

Poe fired up the engine of the vehicle, which was a lightly armored, all-terrain vehicle that had been retro-fitted with a variety of racks for stowing weapons and equipment, including a mounted light machine gun on the passenger side.

Jada had always been a crack shot, and she was eager to try her hand at mobile gunnery in the field, despite her high marks in shipboard simulations.

Jada slotted her helmet over her head, briefly recalling the sensation of having her long, dark hair shorn off during her initial induction into Reaper basic training. It was the first step in a long and grueling evolutionary path towards what she had now become. Jada clasped the seals shut and flexed her fingers inside her armored gloves. Not everyone was born into being a wargir from Errol or a royal stormtrooper of Grotto Corporation, and she had come a long way from the sulphur stacks of Baen 6.

The ATV kicked up gravel and frozen ash as Poe steered the vehicle away from the ledge and across the rock face towards the objective. Long-range sweeps had given Womack enough data to plot a general angle of approach for the ATVs through a series of canyons. They were to identify and eliminate the assorted defense batteries and infantry patrols that surrounded the objective. Once that was complete, the dropships for which the Dire Swords were famous,

would surge into the perimeter and vomit forth a legion of deadly warriors.

Unlike larger mercenary companies, such as the Folken, who maintained well-rounded forces capable of functioning as independent and private armies, the Dire Swords were specialists at what they called 'blitzkrieg,' or lightning war. They were an assault team and came loaded with anti-armor capabilities that allowed them to cause incredible amounts of damage in seconds.

Jada squeezed the grip of the mounted gun and steadied her breathing as the excitement of the pending combat threatened to overwhelm her. Ever since Vorhold, there was emptiness in her, a suffocating void that threatened to swallow her whole, and the only thing that seemed to keep it at bay was the rush of battle.

Jada knew that such a relationship with traumatic past events was rather common amongst veterans of war and she was no different. There were a great many veterans throughout the universe who found that they did not want to put the rifle down, and even when they did, there were few places for them in the civilian world. However, unlike many others, Jada Sek had earned the duty coins to qualify for a place within the Merchants Militant, and like those before her, she had kept hold of her rifle, now selling her gift for violence on the open market to the highest bidder. From now on, her private war with the universe was exceptionally well-paid and exquisitely equipped, though she, like the rest of the mercs of the Dire Swords, would have happily fought with sticks and stones for free.

Poe piloted the ATV off of the low rock formation and swooped down into a canyon that seemed as if it had been worn away by millions of years of water flow. The canyon floor was smooth, as were the walls, and to Jada's eyes, it was truly a marvel. Even now, after so many years and so many adventures, the simple wonder of raw nature, even so ruined as it was here, amazed her. After a life lived in squalid hab blocks, the belly of a Reaper tug, and in the deadly confines of hostile salvage ops, she found the wide-open spaces of the tomb-worlds and dead worlds to be liberating. It occurred to her that she was at her most fearsome in this moment, transformed by the serum, armed to the teeth, and riding into battle alongside warriors equally as grim and terrifying as she was. If there was life after death, or at least the spectre of resurrection, then perhaps she had found it.

"This is the first time I've been planetside across the Ellisian Line, other than the tomb-worlds," said Poe into the comm-bead as the ATV sped across the bottom of the canyon to be joined by two other vehicles bearing Ranec and other mercs. "I haven't got any tech ratings or geologic credentials, but nothing about these canyons seems right."

“Too many side passages and on multiple elevations,” observed Strega, one of the other mercs, as she pulled her ATV alongside Poe’s vehicle. “No tool marks from what I can see, but my money is on intentional design none the less, this place was built.”

“Eyes on!” shouted Berg, who piloted the lead ATV, with Ranec in the gunnery seat. “I’ve got hits on the tracker. No heat signatures, no motion pings, but sonar has them painted.”

“Sentry droids maybe?” asked Jada as she racked the slide of her mounted gun and thumbed the target finder to bring up the bright red crosshairs that would flash green if she happened to point her weapon at anyone wearing a pre-keyed friendly tag, which each of the mercs had bolted to the backs of their helmets.

“They’d have to be advanced tech to move fluidly enough to baffle the motion tracker and be hydro-cooled to mask the heat,” answered Poe as he began looking around the canyon, observing the various side passages cut into the rock on their level and above them. “That’d be some expensive hardware for a bunch of gunslingers and a start-up corporation.”

“Poe, Strega, hang back, I’m almost on top of them,” came Berg’s voice over the comm-bead as the lead ATV sped up to attack speed and disappeared around a tight bend in the canyon, “I’m committed. Let’s see what’s out here with us.”

“I’m seeing the same thing they are and there’s just nothing here,” said Strega, her voice noticeably exasperated as she and Poe slowed their vehicles to thirty percent speed, “I’m getting hits all around us, like we’re passing right through them.”

Just as Strega finished speaking, Jada felt a cold sensation wash across her body. It was unlikely that any cold from the outside would penetrate the mag-armor, much less the insulated bodyglove to which it was attached.

Their suits were advanced indeed, and a Dire Sword could function as a self-contained fighting unit for days at a time, pulling water and nutrients from small containers on their backs even as their waste materials were recycled within the suit. She had found the armor similar to her salvage marine kit, though far beyond her Grotto tech in terms of efficiency and effectiveness, not to mention sheer cost.

Buying into the Dire Swords had taken every scrap of wealth she had, and the young woman had found that she couldn’t have cared less. Money wasn’t important to her anymore and perhaps hadn’t been since she’d emerged from that dark pit alone in the world.

“Did you just feel that?” asked Mors, the gunner on Strega’s ATV, as he began to sweep his weapon back and forth across the canyon.

“I don’t see anything, but the scanner says I’m driving through a

forest of hits," said Strega as she visibly shuddered, as did Poe and Jada once more as they passed through more cold spots.

"Strega, Poe, I've got nothing," reported Berg as his vehicle appeared around the bend, slowly coming to meet the other ATVs, and like Mors, the merc, Ranec, was moving the barrel of his mounted gun across the canyon walls as if searching for a target he couldn't see.

"Womack, you hearing this?" said Poe as the three vehicles backed in bumper-to-bumper in a defensive maneuver that gave them a near three hundred and sixty degree field of fire, "I've got easily three dozen hits just in the immediate area. No heat, no motion, just sonar."

"Copy that, Poe, same on our approach vector. Marius can't see it from Sword Base on any of his instruments, so it's got to be something in the environment messing with our gear," Womack responded in their comm-beads. "No clue why we feel the cold spots either."

"Probably ghosts," said Ranec, taking one hand off the grip of the machine gun to finger the combat knife he had mounted to his chest plate, a ceremonial blade from his home world of Polonia, "People everywhere used to believe in that sort of thing."

"Well, if that's the case, then we're about to make a whole lot more of them," quipped Womack. "Spin back up and stay on mission, let's get this done."

The six mercs in the canyon looked at each other, none of them feeling good about the scanner anomalies, though each knowing that there was a task at hand. Poe broke the silence by gunning his engine and rolling out, quickly followed by Strega and Berg.

Jada had experienced a great many oddities in her time as a Reaper and had learned, much like the other mercs, to take the bizarre in stride. Necrospace was a Pandora's Box of terrors and treasures, and everyone present had long since accepted that some things were better left alone. A smart contractor did the job, got paid, and didn't ask questions, either of the employer or the universe, because some answers were simply things no sane person ever wanted to know.

"Well, whatever they are, it sure hasn't stopped the Basepholon working stiffs from making a play at the ink-rock deposits," observed Jada as the three ATVs sped through the canyon, doing her best to ignore the continuous hits on the scanner and the inexplicable cold spots that made her body shiver. "Maybe it'll help mask our approach."

Ten minutes later, they were close enough to the objective that Jada could see the smoke stacks of the refinery.

There were six of them, much larger than she had anticipated, and their size indicated a truly massive refinery compound just out of

sight. The startup corporation, Basepholon, was indeed placing all bets on this operation.

It was common for there to be startup corporations attempting to make their initial profits through exploiting the lawless sectors of necrospace. Competitors in the forgotten places of the universe were somewhat less numerous, though no less ferocious. These sorts of 'smash and grab' tactics were common among start-ups since they usually lacked sufficient funds to finance both industrial and military operations in tandem. They either hired cheap mercenaries to secure an initial holding, or set up an operation and hoped they could make a profit before anything more deadly than a few scavengers came looking for prey.

If a fledgling company like Basepholon could recoup their startup capital with such an operation, they could infuse their investment portfolio with raw cash and begin the grindingly slow process of becoming a player in the great corporate game. The fact that they'd been able to field both an industrial element and a military element meant that somewhere in the vastness of corporate space, there were a number of high-end investors waiting greedily for their rate of return and that the on-site management team would likely fight until the bitter end.

As Jada scanned the canyon edges, the HUD in her helmet's interior pinged on a carefully concealed anti-aircraft battery. Had she been wearing her former Reaper helmet, the battery would not have been noticeable until she was nearly on top of it.

The Dire Sword rigs were far more advanced, and she was able to pick it out of the rock face with relative ease. She counted herself lucky that during the battle on Gedra Prime, she had not been one of the many Grotto soldiers to be faced with the Folken counter-attack. She was positive that such ocular tech was devastatingly effective in poor visibility conditions. The battery was stout; sporting a quad-cannon that likely fired flak rounds capable of shredding even the Dire Sword's armored dropships.

While Basepholon might not have high-end Augur sentry droids or mercs from the Merchants Militant, they had scraped together enough funds for an impressive array of hardware none-the-less. For a company with the resources to land an industrial complex while also fielding armor units and a gunslinger cadre, they were taking quite the risk to put all of their efforts into this single play.

Such was the lure of the ruined worlds this side of the Ellisian Line, thought Jada as she let go of her machine gun and leaned over the side of the vehicle to grasp one of the tube-rockets mounted on the weapons rack.

Had the Basepholon facility gone unnoticed by the rightful

claimants of this world, House Indron of Grotto Corporation, the company could have tripled or even quadrupled their investment if the ink-rock deposit was even half as large as the data suggested.

Too bad for Basepholon, thought Jada to herself as she hefted the tube launcher to her shoulder and peered through the target finder, because Boss Aiken seemed to relish opportunities to field the Dire Swords, like a child playing with deadly new toys.

This was the first time Jada had attempted to use the tube launcher in motion, not to mention while standing upon the ATV as it hurtled down the canyon floor. To her amazement, it was inexplicably easy and she felt the micro-fibers of her muscles and reinforced skeletal structure moving to compensate for the subtle shifts in pitch and balance.

Unlike the bulky plates of her former Reaper combat rig, the mag-armor was segmented, and it protected her while giving her unrestricted movement. It was positively exhilarating, and Jada realized there was a gentle growl deep in the back of her throat as the target finder locked onto the battery and coded red.

She squeezed the trigger and the tube launcher bucked with the blast of the rocket's ignition. A projectile easily the length of her arm left the tube and shrieked towards the gun battery. Jada felt her mag-armor lock up, as it was designed to do in moments of impact or extreme g-force, and lend its support to her enhanced physique to keep her standing.

Instantly, Jada realized that had she been her former self and fired the weapon, which would have already been difficult considering the tube's natural weight, she would have broken her spine and fallen off of the ATV.

The hardened tip of the rocket punched through the armor plating of the battery's metal frame, exposing the compressed plasma warhead just behind the rocket's tip.

Jada wasn't familiar with that specific make and model of anti-air battery, but it had certainly looked expensive. Most of the Fenrir Industries anti-air models, and gun nests for that matter, kept their ammunition drums mounted on the outside of the gun for easy exchange. The engineers of Fenrir were well known for favoring weapons that had high rates of fire and cheap ammunition. This particular model, of unknown origin, must have kept the ammunition stored inside the armored frame, as the plasma explosion inside the rig ignited a secondary explosion that tore the battery apart from the inside out.

Jada and Poe were already speeding down the canyon by the time the secondary explosion hit. When she looked back, Jada couldn't see any bodies being flung into the air. Likely they were slagged by the

initial plasma blast, and judging from the size of the battery, it was likely that Jada had just ended the life of easily four to six individuals.

"*Strega, battery two on your left!*" shouted Poe just before swerving the vehicle to narrowly avoid a series of shots coming from a sentry crouching just inside one of the side passages above. "*Sniper high and right!*"

Jada had already slapped the empty tube launcher back into its place on the rack and was bringing her gun online. The merc saw that she didn't have the angle to get her mounted weapon to bear, as they were already nearly past the shooter's position, so she swiftly drew the sidearm holstered on her thigh. Jada took aim at the shooter, trusting in her instincts and experience to line it up perfectly, and squeezed the trigger twice. The shooter was in partial cover, but the standard Dire Swords sidearm fired magnum rounds, designed for maximum impact.

The first round blew a large chunk of rock away from the boulder the shooter was using for cover and the resulting storm of shrapnel spooked them. When he stood to change position, Jada's second round caught him squarely in the chest and sent his body sailing off the ledge and down into the canyon. She wasn't sure if the round had punched through his armor, though it mattered little, as the fall was certainly a lethal one. The fact that the shooter had allowed her to flush him out with a single shot indicated that while they were acceptably armed and armored, the enemy were certainly low-rent gunslingers and a far cry from the professional mercenaries that were about to descend upon them.

A second explosion erupted back and to the left as Mors fired his rocket. Moments later, Ranec's machine gun opened up on a shooter on the far wall of the canyon.

It seemed that the Basepholon forces understood something of strategy and had identified this canyon as a prime avenue for approach by any would-be attackers. However, recon data indicated that there were five such canyons leading towards the facility, following the natural, however bizarre, ebb and flow of the landscape. Likely, that was why there was such a large ink-rock deposit in that spot as the facility was poised just above the place where all of the canyons converged. Most of the rest of the canyons were likely to be similarly protected, though as of yet, the resistance was modest at best.

As if to argue Jada's musings, the ATVs rounded a corner and found themselves facing a machine gun nest perched atop a pre-fabricated barricade. Without hesitation, Jada strafed the barricade with gunfire as Poe hit the accelerator and cut sharply to the left.

As the ATV sped at a steep angle towards the barricade, Poe

thumbed his smoke, and from the back of the vehicle, several canisters blew open and began belching forth clouds of thick purple smoke.

Jada's swift reaction on the trigger had suppressed the enemy for several precious seconds, and by the time the gunner on the barricade managed to start firing, the ATV had all but clogged the canyon with smoke. The gunner attempted to track Poe's ATV with fire, but the vehicle was nearly clear of the field of fire as the merc reached the far wall and was enveloped in smoke.

Without a clear target, the gunner and several riflemen began firing blindly into the purple chaos. A number of rounds found their mark upon vehicle and body armor, but were turned away by the superior technology.

Seconds later, rockets streaked out of the smoke from launchers wielded by Ranec and Mors to slam into the barricade. Their hits were precise, with Ranec taking out the machine gun nest and Mors blasting a hole through the barricade. Jada, like the others, had toggled her HUD to thermal, and was using her mounted weapon to pick off shooters one by one.

The gunslingers hadn't caught on to the fact that the Dire Swords could see through the smoke, and that it was their muzzle flares that gave them away. Berg and Strega's ATVs sped forward as their gunners racked their tubes while Poe and Jada kept the pressure on the barricades with her mounted weapon.

"We're through!" said Ranec in the comm-bead moments later, and Poe steered the ATV past the smoke and through the hole Mors had made with his rocket.

When they cleared the barricade, Jada saw that it had indeed been a pre-fabricated mobile barricade, complete with a gun nest mount and several catwalks that led to firing steps. The sentries, now dead or dying, had one large supply container just behind the barricade that likely doubled as their sleeping quarters in between shifts.

Berg and Strega had already continued hurtling down the canyon towards the facility that loomed ever closer. Jada stood up while she drew her sidearm once more, then turned to aim it behind her. Just as she suspected, two gunslingers emerged from the container, neither in armor and looking disheveled from being awakened so rudely. They had their rifles up and began to fire just as Jada did the same. Their fire raked across the ATV, though as before, the rounds were deflected by the superior grade of the vehicle's armor. Jada's shots pounded into the unarmored bodies of the two gunslingers and sent them spinning away in a wash of blood as the heavy magnum rounds tore into them.

"Good catch," nodded Poe as he sped up to follow the other vehicles that were already engaged in a firefight with another

machine gun nest. They took out another anti-air battery, while Jada returned to her seat. “I took that for supply only.”

“It’s probably been awhile since you were a cheap grunt,” smiled Jada as she gripped the machine gun and began scanning for targets as the giant smoke stacks grew closer and closer. “I can still relate.”

Moments later, their ATV joined with the others at the mouth of the canyon, and Jada was able to see the ink-rock facility for the first time. It was a massive complex, made from pre-fabricated interlocking pieces that could be hauled through the void and put together planetside. Such facilities were meant to be temporary, and in many ways were designed for just this sort of rapid extraction mission. Usually, they were built and then abandoned once the resources being reaped were exhausted since the cost of salvaging such a facility was usually not worth the thin profit margin, whereas a more permanent structure would be a prime haul.

In all her years as a salvage marine, Jada had never once been ordered to scrap a pre-fab, though there had been at least two occasions where she and the other Reapers had been ordered to ‘forcibly relocate’ squatters simply because they were trespassing.

The workers and warriors of Basepholon were trespassing, though they had come ready to fight about the particulars. Around the series of rectangular buildings that comprised the compound, there were more pre-fab barricades, dotted with gun nests, and Jada could see many dozens of gunslingers scrambling about the compound.

Members of the Merchants Militant called the unlicensed freelancers ‘gunslingers’ less as a way of insulting them than to differentiate between themselves and the freelance soldiers. Without any sort of quality control or contracting oversight, there was no guarantee of integrity or effectiveness when one hired a gunslinger. However, the assurances of Merchant Militant contractors made them prohibitively expensive for many of the smaller companies and individual ventures, and so the gunslingers never lacked for work.

As Jada watched them hastily prepare to defend themselves against the Dire Swords, she was certain that to underestimate the gunslingers was a mistake. They were no less eager to survive the coming battle, and she herself recalled what it had been like being outgunned by elite mercs.

“Dropships en route, ETA two minutes,” came the voice of Womack across the comm-bead. “Let’s soften them up before the hammer drops.”

The three ATVs sped forward as each of the gunners shouldered the last of their tube launchers. Jada took deep breaths as she steadied herself in spite of the steep angle of approach while the ATV raced down the mouth of the canyon and directly towards the front of the

complex.

There was no available cover as the canyons all emptied into a wide basin over which the compound was built. Any number of snipers, gunners, and cannons could be directed at them. It was because of these sorts of chaotic and seemingly insane tactics that the Dire Swords earned their reputation. There was about to be so much action on the ground that it was unlikely anyone in that compound would notice the dropships descending from the stratosphere.

“We fight as though dead,” said Poe, and his words were echoed by the rest of the mercs as they neared firing range.

Each of them had already faced the worst moment of their lives and come through it, even if not wholly unscathed. They had each endured the Rack and emerged as meta-humans. All of them bore the emblem of their own skulls upon their helmets. They were at war with the universe itself, and the contract of the day only determined who was on the other end of the gun.

As they neared firing range, Jada could see Womack and his crew pulling alongside them, having emerged from one of the other canyons. Now there were six ATVs speeding across the open ground towards the complex and they had certainly been noticed.

Snipers positioned on the roof of the complex opened up, and Jada was knocked back into her seat by a well-placed round. Her mag-armor had kept her alive, but the impact had left her gasping for breath. Had she been un-enhanced, the round would have surely thrown her into cardiac arrest and she doubted even with the mag-armor that she’d have survived.

The Dire Swords returned fire with their rockets, and five deadly projectiles smashed into machine gun nests, causing explosions to rip through the front perimeter.

Jada forced herself back to her feet and hefted the tube to her shoulder. The purpose of the seemingly reckless assault was to sow chaos and confusion among the enemy. While they engaged the ATVs, the dropships would be able to approach without much resistance. By the time they arrived to storm the compound, the defenders would be unable to mount an effective countermeasure. It was a tactic that put Jada, Poe, and the rest of the provocateurs at great risk, but made for an overall potent coordinated attack. The goal was not to destroy the facility, but to seize it for use by House Indron.

Lord Soren had intentionally allowed the Basepholon workers to bring their operation to full functionality before launching the punitive expedition.

There was always a profit to be reaped, thought Jada as she sighted in on what appeared to be another supply container. Her rocket passed over the low barricade wall and punched through the

thin metal sides. It must have been a magazine for the gun nests as she had suspected, because the container was ripped apart by secondary explosions that sent shrapnel tearing through the air in all directions.

Though their initial assault had been devastating, the gunslingers, to their credit, rallied quickly. The ATVs pulled up and made sharp turns as they skirted the edges of rifle range, nearly all of them showered in sparks as hails of fire from shooters on the barricade found them.

Suddenly, a deep thud sent shudders through Jada's chest, followed by a concussive explosion on her right. The merc turned and her eyes widened as she saw one of the ATVs blossoming into a multitude of pieces in mid-air as it was thrown by the explosion. Time seemed to slow down and she saw the torso of what had once been a Dire Sword spinning off in another direction, trailing its guts and shreds of armor in its wake. The other merc, seemingly whole, sailed over Poe's ATV and Jada did not see him or her land as her own vehicle spend onwards.

"*RPGs!*" shouted Womack through the comm-bead, "*Smoke the line!*"

The five remaining ATVs broke off in different directions, though both Poe and Womack steered their vehicles in tight circles as they cranked their emitters to create a thick purple smoke screen.

Jada dared not fire for fear of hitting her comrades as Poe displayed expert skill in cutting the wheels to keep the screen centered on the barricades instead of dissipating across the open ground. After several passes, Poe and Womack disengaged and brought their vehicles around to slot in behind the others as they swept in for a strafing run.

Jada's HUD cut through the smoke and she sighted in on a gunslinger who was desperately trying to reload her RPG launcher. The merc cut loose with the mounted gun and the salvo of rounds shredded the soldier, sending her body hurling backwards and off the firestep.

All five of the ATVs pressed the attack. Round after round from the mounted guns impacted armor and barricades, tearing through flesh and bone. Against the withering fire, there was little the gunslingers could do but haphazardly shoot back, mostly while crouched behind what remained of their barricades. The kill zone ahead of them was still obscured with smoke, and though plenty of rounds hit the Dire Swords and their vehicles, only Strega's ATV was disabled in the exchange. Through the smoke, Jada saw both Strega and Mors dismount and rush the barricades on foot.

"Bounding!" shouted Mors as he followed Strega, who was several steps ahead of him and already firing her rifle at the enemy.

As Poe brought their vehicle around for another strafing run, Jada could see through the smoke as Strega and Mors scaled the barricade with superhuman agility despite the bulk of their mag-armor. They were tall enough that a running leap allowed them to grasp the top edge of the barricades, then, using a combination of momentum and their incredible strength, they pulled themselves up high enough to get a leg on the ledge. From there, it was easy enough to drop behind the barricade and continue the fight, which they most certainly did once Jada lost sight of them over the wall.

Womack must have decided that now was as good a time as any to breach the perimeter, as his voice came over the comm-bead just as Jada and Poe finished another devastating strafing run.

"*Gunners dismount and advance!"* ordered Womack, which prompted Poe to crank the wheel sharply and send their vehicle screaming back towards the barricades, which were becoming steadily more visible as the smoke dissipated, allowing the few remaining defenders to pick their targets more effectively, "Drivers, hug the wall, secure your ride. *Go second wave!*"

Jada's heart was beating madly as the barricade loomed. She could feel the power surging in her body as if it knew that its greatest purpose was about to be fulfilled. She unclipped her safety line and put the safety back in place on her mounted gun before flexing her grip and steadying herself for the dismount maneuver.

While ATV combat was a critical part of her training and a useful diversionary stratagem, it was on their feet that the Dire Swords were able to bring to bear the full might of their enhanced bodies. The merc was ready to see what she could do outside the managed conditions of the training deck.

Poe was heading straight at the wall, and then at the last moment, he turned the wheel and hit the brakes, which gave Jada a boost of momentum as she unfurled her powerful legs and leapt into the air. The merc slammed into the top of the barricade wall, activating the small magnets on the outside of her armor, giving her additional purchase as she pulled herself up and over the obstacle. She deactivated the mags as she landed, her sidearm already drawn and hunting for targets. The gunslingers, at least in this sector of the compound, had suffered what she hastily assessed as just over sixty percent casualties already, though considering the dramatic disparity in the size of their force compared to the Dire Swords, that meant there were still a great many active shooters to engage.

Before she was fully aware of herself, the merc had put two rounds through the chest of a gunslinger who had been propping himself up against the inside of the barricade. Likely, he had taken a concussion or shrapnel from one of the rockets and was attempting to

collect himself, though he now slumped to the ground, having been taken out of the fight for good.

Jada raised the pistol and turned to her right, taking a knee to assume a crouching position. The movement was a keen one, as a burst of fire cut through the air where she'd been standing.

As Jada squeezed the trigger, she marveled at the level of combat awareness she was now capable of as a meta-human. The old Jada Sek would have just died with bullets in her skull, yet here she was, dropping the assailant with fire from her sidearm while she scanned her immediate area for more targets. The merc rose from her crouch as she slid the sidearm back into its holster with one hand while grasping the assault rifle mounted on her back.

Jada brought the rifle to her shoulder and began bounding parallel to the barricade, noticing that Mors and Strega were engaging along the parallel in the other direction.

The gunslingers were in complete disarray, having not been prepared for the seemingly reckless and yet devastating ATV assault.

The merc found a gunslinger with her sights and put several rounds through his side, firing upon a second hostile as the first collapsed in a heap before her. The enemy got off one shot before jerking wildly as the impacts of Jada's fire sent him sprawling. The merc brought her gun up, and then just as quickly, moved the muzzle aside as Ranec clambered over the barricade and came to land downrange of her. In seconds, the two of them moved in tandem across the parallel, their combined fire laying out three more gunslingers even as Berg and Poe joined them on the other side of the barricade.

"Counterattack on the second parallel!" shouted Poe as he pointed at the compound, his gesture revealing to the others that several platoon strength elements were pouring out of the inner perimeter of the compound.

The gunslingers were carrying mobile flak boards, the sort that Jada had become accustomed to using during her time as a salvage marine, and just as she would have done, the gunslingers used them as shields to cover their advance before planting them on the hard ground.

The Dire Swords were on the other side of the barricade. There was little cover between them and the new line of defense the gunslingers had swiftly erected. In seconds, this area would become a shooting gallery and the mercs who had scaled the barricade would be shot down, even if they took a few of the enemy with them prior to dying.

"*Overwatch, dropships in ten seconds!"* came the voice of Marcus over the company channel.

Jada looked at the ten Dire Swords crouching behind the debris left from their initial assault bitterly aware of how long ten seconds of a firefight could be.

"Pour it on, people!" bellowed Womack as he began rapid firing his rifle, focused more on keeping a sustained impact against the flak boards than he was at actually zeroing in on hostile targets.

Jada raise her rifle to her shoulder and took aim, begrudgingly admitting that the gunslingers had responded well and had locked their line solidly. She could find little armor in her sights, and so like Womack, she focused on beating against the flak boards with hard rounds.

The ten Dire Swords would lose a shooting match against that many gunslingers, but they would be able to keep the enemy cowering behind cover with their ten rifles on blast. When Jada's magazine went dry, followed by the clicking sound of Ranec's hitting empty also, the merc knew that they only had moments before the gunslingers would return fire as the mercs reloaded.

Instead of bothering to load another magazine, Jada ripped her sidearm back out of its holster and fired, knowing she only had half a magazine. The magnum rounds hammered against the flak boards and soon the only sound coming from the Dire Swords line was the throaty cough of their pistols before they too went dry.

The gunslingers responded immediately. The flak board walls opened up and the muzzles of dozens of rifles began to vomit projectiles. No sooner had the Dire Swords flung themselves this way and that to avoid at least some of the hailstorm of bullets did the static electrical discharges begin to fill the air.

Jada was thrown against the wall of the barricade as she was peppered with small arms fire, and both her HUD and her senses flared with pain and warnings indicating that at least some of the rounds had hit flesh. The merc fell to the ground, landing on her shoulder, scrambling to slap a fresh magazine into her pistol. Her eyes were met with a sight that she was sure would be with her for the rest of her life, regardless of how long or short a time that might be.

Dire Swords were igniting their dropshields, the source of the barrage of electric discharges in the air, and slamming into the ground. Many of the mercs were landing directly in the midst of the gunslinger formations, the impact of their dropshields flinging many of the enemy aside and outright crushing others.

The gunslingers were immediately set upon by the mercs among them as the fresh Dire Swords went to work. In the time it took Jada to get to her feet and swap out her pistol for her rifle, the shooting gallery had become a bloodbath as the mercs blasted through the ranks of gunslingers at point blank range. In seconds, the ten Dire

Swords who had been fighting to seize the barricade had been joined by two dozen more elite mercenaries and the tide of the battle had shifted dramatically.

Jada racked the slide of her rifle to chamber the first round of the new magazine and took aim at a gunslinger that was firing upon one of her comrades. Two well placed shots sent the hostile crumpling over. She saw that many of the gunslingers were already throwing their weapons down and thrusting their arms skyward with open palms.

These were working men and women who fought for cash, not cause, and they knew they were beaten. There was no profit in fighting a battle that was already lost and they weren't about to die for Basepholon now that they saw victory was out of reach.

Jada smacked the butt of her rifle against the temple of a soldier who was kneeling with his back to her. The man had dropped his rifle and assumed a surrender position without realizing she was behind him. There was little point in killing him, but she wasn't about to give him the opportunity to change his mind and take up arms once more.

Other Dire Swords had landed on top of the compound building itself, and though the shooting had all but stopped outside, her keen ears could hear the muted crackle and pop of small arms fire being exchanged inside the pre-fab complex.

Womack appeared at her side and gestured silently for her to follow him, which she did, noticing that Poe had fallen into step with her, as had Taymar, Womack's battle buddy.

As the four Dire Swords sprinted across the battlefield, Jada watched the drop warriors make quick work of the handful of gunslingers that didn't have the good sense to surrender. Most of the mercs were hastily rounding up the surviving gunslingers, though she saw a handful enter the complex ahead of Womack and his group.

The plan had been to cause such a commotion on the defensive perimeter that the Dire Swords could draw out the vast majority of the gunslingers, leaving only a few remaining inside the complex alongside the civilian staff. The mission was to seize the facility intact and that meant keeping the fighting inside the complex to a minimum.

The Dire Swords were elite mercs, not predisposed to avoiding collateral damage, which made drawing the fight outdoors, a critical element. Thankfully, it seemed to have worked, as Jada and the others followed Womack, who was also bleeding from several wounds, into the depths of the facility.

Their large frames, made all the more bulky by the mag-armor protecting them, were difficult to maneuver inside the facility making for slow going. They came upon a group of civilian staffers who were attempting to hide themselves in what appeared to be a supply locker.

Womack tore the lock off the sliding door with his armored hand and kicked the door open. Before the staffers could react, the merc captain shot the one closest to him through the head. Blood and brains sprayed across the others, the shocking execution driving them as a group into the far corner. Womack held his rifle at the ready and looked at the others for a moment before speaking, his power over them having been made unquestionably clear.

"Your gunslingers are fragged, this is all but over," stated Womack as he looked at the staffers from his iron sights, the rifle scope having been slid into its alternate position, a maneuver common amongst the mercs when fighting in such close quarters. "One of you is going to take me to the drill; the rest of you will remain in this room until given further instruction. How copy?"

"We offer no resistance," said a middle-aged woman who wore what looked to be an engineer's jumpsuit, splattered with gore, her hands up with palms facing out. "I'll show you the drill."

The woman's swift acceptance of the situation and willingness to aid the conquerors impressed Jada. It reminded her of the Helion staffers the salvage marines sometimes captured after void battles at the height of the Ellisian trade war. There was little one could do in the face of such bloody events, and Jada imagined that it was a terrifying thing to have a co-worker so coldly executed by an armored giant with a skull face. As Womack gripped the woman by the shoulder and placed the muzzle of his rifle into the small of her back, Jada found herself considering the actions of the day.

She'd learned years ago that in this universe, there were no heroes, only men and women trying to make their way. Some tried to go about things in an ethical way, or at least with a sense of community, and generally that approach worked out for people. Things got messy when one community found itself at odds with another, whether it was on the grand scale of Grotto Corporation against Helion Corporation, or something as small as this ink-rock facility and those who now fought to either hold it or seize it. Necrospace was a tapestry of commerce and conquest, and the merc realized that she would likely have shot the staffer just as Womack had, because it was an effective way to neutralize them as hostiles and transform the lot of them into allies with a single bullet. The civilian staffers were there for the paycheck, just like the gunslingers, and their loyalty to Basepholon was relative.

Taymar flanked the engineer, her massive armored frame offering a degree of protection for the smaller woman, sweeping her rifle back and forth across the hallway as the group moved towards the access stairs. There were a number of working elevators, though everyone knew that wasn't an option given the circumstances.

It was just as well, as Jada could hear a brief but intense firefight begin and end perhaps only one or two decks above them. The gunslingers that remained were putting up a fight; she had to give them that, which was unfortunate as they had lost this battle on the ground minutes ago. The thought made her realize that being inside the compound had caused considerable static in her comm-bead. The merc realized that many of the people in the facility still trying to defend it might not know they were on the losing side.

"Engineer," said Jada once she had used her HUD to activate the microphone on the underside of her helmet, "Where is the nearest broadcast terminal for the internal communication system?"

Womack pulled back slightly on the captive woman's shoulder while still pushing insistently with the muzzle of his rifle. The woman swiftly nodded her head.

"The management suite is near the top, your people might already control it," she answered, slowly pointing her finger towards a series of panels set into the wall near the front of the stairs. With her other hand, she folded down the collar of her jumpsuit to reveal a small pin mic affixed on the inside of the suit. "There are emergency comms that can broadcast across each duty station, anyone with a working pin will get it, but the planet's surface messes with the broadcast. Anyone outside will just hear static."

"I see where you're going with this, Jada," Womack said, nodding, and then gestured for Taymar to pull security on the stairs while he had Poe keep watch over the hallway, before turning back to the engineer. "Patch me in."

The engineer used a key to open the panel. Inside was a set of speakers and mics set into the wall, with a keypad next to it. The engineer punched in a short code and the terminal went green.

"Mic is hot, sir," said the engineer as she backed away from the panel.

Before Womack could speak, shots rang out from the stairwell and the mercs all turned to see Taymar firing downwards. Several bursts of fire answered hers. The merc stumbled backwards as some of the bullets hit her in the arm and shoulder, though she managed not to drop her rifle.

Jada sprang into action and took Taymar's place on the stairs as the other merc regained her footing. Jada didn't bother aiming carefully, more interested in spraying the stairs below with indiscriminate fire, driving anyone down there into cover while her team could get into position.

Taymar re-joined Jada on the stairs, and the two of them peered down their iron sights at what appeared to be a full squad of gunslingers attempting to push their way up the stairs. The two mercs

engaged, and after a furious few seconds, the exchange of fire left two gunslingers dead and at least two more wounded and in cover.

Jada noticed that she'd taken a shot to the hand, which now didn't seem to be working properly, but thankfully, it was her off hand. "Men and women of Basepholon," boomed Womack's voice suddenly, the sound of it coming from various speakers set into the ceiling throughout the compound. "In response to illegal trespass and operations, this facility has been assaulted by Merchants Militant in the name of House Indron and Grotto Corporation. All equipment and resources are to be rendered for procurement. All personnel are advised to lay down arms and make overt surrender. If there is not a Merchants Militant contractor in your immediate area, you are advised to remain where you are and await collection. Any resistance beyond this point will be subject to kill-on-sight processing."

As soon as Womack finished his pronouncement, the gunslingers downstairs pitched their rifles onto the stairwell.

"We offer no resistance!" shouted an unknown voice from below. Jada kept her rifle trained on the target area as Taymar nodded to Womack and descended the stairs with her rifle at the ready.

"Friendly coming down! Surrender subjects, assume a kneeling position, hands interlocked around the back of your head! Wounded personnel, extend one hand with two fingers up!" shouted Taymar as she moved cautiously around the first bend in the stair, now followed by Jada, who had been replaced at the top by Poe.

"Shoot all non-compliants," growled Womack, and Jada hefted her rifle in preparation for just that as she fell in behind Taymar.

There had been seven gunslingers. Three of them were pitched over dead and full of holes. Of the four who remained, three seemed uninjured. Jada marveled at how costly even that brief firefight with her and Taymar had been for the gunslingers, and was silently thankful for not only the power of her body, but the stout quality of her mag-armor.

An unenhanced human being would have been unable to wear such armor in the first place and that fact alone made each Dire Sword singularly deadly, even amongst their peers in the Merchants Militant at large.

Taymar secured the three able-bodied gunslingers by binding them together with a length of zip-cable from her utility belt. Jada briefly attended the wounded man, who was slowly bleeding out from a ragged bullet hole in the small of his back. Jada couldn't recall clearly whether it had been her or Taymar who had shot the man, though such a thing mattered little in the frenzied chaos of combat.

The Dire Swords were not without a sense of propriety, knowing that every gunslinger or staffer captured represented an eventual

positive value when the details of this mission were calculated.

It was less out of a sense of caregiving that Jada used her med-kit to swiftly apply a clotting graft to the man's wound, but more a keen understanding of the Bottom Line.

Jada heard no additional shooting in the decks above or below them and hoped that the surrender would go as smoothly for the rest of the mercs as this one had.

Womack brought down the engineer and the group kept descending stairs, the signs on the wall indicating that the drilling command deck was only two more flights down. They encountered no additional resistance as they moved, and soon, the group passed through the access door leading out of the stairwell and onto the drilling deck.

Jada was impressed by what she saw. The former salvage marine had been involved in a number of ink-rock scrap jobs, though she had never seen a fully functional operation. Beyond what she'd seen from a distance back home, Jada suddenly realized that her impression of the industry of corporate civilization was the wreckage and decay of such operations. As a Reaper, she'd never had occasion to enter active industrial facilities, only the abandoned shells of them and even the refurbished operations of occasional squatters paled in comparison with the grand scale of the drilling platform just below them.

There was a fortune in raw material down in that black abyss of a drilling shaft. Upon seeing that, Jada understood just how powerful the allure must have been for the corporate masters of the fledgling Basepholon.

If she'd lived a different life, been born into a different family, she could imagine how someone might see this level of wealth ready to be prised from the grip of the planet and choose to risk it all on a smash and grab operation.

This ploy would have transformed Basepholon from an upstart company to a player in the great corporate game. Alas, they had picked the wrong opponent to steal from. Lord Aiden Soren was a shrewd man, yet daring in his own way, which made him a profoundly deadly opponent, in the boardroom and on the battlefield. This was a man who had helped the Reapers hold a successful labor strike, the repercussions of which were already rippling through the Grotto civilization and the corporate economy in general. He could not be predicted, save that a challenge to his personal ambition would be met in due time, and that made him a deadly adversary and a demanding employer.

As Jada entered the drilling command bridge, she saw Lord Soren's opponent of the hour, a man she recalled from the briefing as Ferris Basepholon. This man was a lower member of the elite house

that ruled the company of the same name, based off of the single planet that they controlled on the other side of the universe. Her eyes went from the man to the pistol in his hand, then to the drill that he stared at so intently.

Jada's salvage instincts kicked in, and she noticed that the brake bolts had been engaged. It was a common feature on many rigs, which allowed the captain or topmost manager to take manual control of the drill in the event of mutiny or piracy. Once the brake bolts were engaged, the drill would not move. If the bolts weren't disengaged with the proper command pattern through the control deck, then they'd have to be cut. The problem with cutting the brake bolts was that they slotted through the drill in such a way that any would-be scrappers or thieves would have to destroy the bit to get through the bolts, making the entire endeavor pointless.

"Ferris Basepholon, you have been ordered to lay down arms!" growled Womack as he shoved the engineer to the ground in front of him and raised his rifle. "Comply or die!"

"Boss, he has the brake bolts engaged," countered Jada as she flanked the corporate executive and pointed to the drilling platform below. "If he doesn't release those, we'll have to cut the bit and Grotto will have to buy a new one."

"It's a drill, they can't be that expensive," observed Poe flippantly as he moved to flank the executive from the other side.

"The drill is everything," stated Ferris. The corporate executive squared his shoulders and took a deep breath as he turned his head to address Womack. "Captain, your comrade is correct. I have engaged the brake bolts and should I refuse to retract them, your employer's profit margin on this operation will be thin indeed."

"You sure about the bolts, Jada?" asked Poe as he gingerly placed a boot on the edge of the shallow steps leading to the raised command pulpit upon which the executive had positioned himself. "Maybe it's a bluff to buy time for a counter attack; can you really trust an elite?"

"The bolts are standard pattern for every drill in corporate space worth owning," Jada verified as she looked back from the drill towards Ferris Basepholon. "He's trying to negotiate."

"Jada, is it?" asked Ferris, careful to keep his body still as Womack and Poe continued to close in on him, with Taymar pulling security. "I can hear the Grotto in your accent, but as you are with the Merchants Militant, I must assume you earned your place among them while serving as a Reaper."

"The drill," said Womack flatly, having stepped onto the pulpit deck, though carefully making sure that he had a row of control boxes between him and the executive. "If you want to live, you will comply."

“Mercenary, this facility represents the whole of my house’s assets, and though we are a small organization, the board that rules Basepholon is rather exacting in their expectations,” answered Ferris. His facial expression shifted from the arrogant calm that most commoners and soldiers expected from the elites to something of a disappointed resignation. “My only hopes for life and liberty lie with garnering the goodwill of your employer. I simply wish to demonstrate the power I have, however temporary, with regards to the Bottom Line of this conflict.”

“We have big guns and you have a big drill,” Poe replied with a smile as he looked over to Womack. At a nod from his captain, he slung his rifle and approached Ferris with his palms open. “You’ve made your point. Release the bolts and we can call this fight over.”

“Forgive me, but you are a grunt, even if among the finest in the universe,” scoffed Ferris, the arrogance snapping back into place in an instant. He turned to Womack. “I want your captain’s word that I’ll be handled with the respect befitting my station.”

“Release the drill and Lord Soren will determine your fate,” stated Womack, then, after a moment of tense silence, he added, “Poe, observe the release procedure, and then secure the executive.”

As Jada watched Ferris punch in the keys and then submit begrudgingly to having Poe bind his hands with clips and cable from his utility belt, she took note of how calmly the corporate executive had managed the entire situation. Having four Merchants Militants bearing down on him had not shaken his demeanor, even if it demanded a measured response given all of the firearms trained upon him.

She couldn’t tell whether it was a steely reserve in the man himself or simply a side effect of being born and raised an elite. Even in such a small company as Basepholon, this man, or at least his house, was likely the master of millions of lives. Was this courage under fire or the detached superiority so common in the elite strata of corporate populations?

As the brake bolts retracted, Jada supposed that it was somewhat irrelevant to her and to the mission. The drill was secure, the facility had been seized, and once cor-sec forces from House Indron arrived, the Dire Swords would be relieved, paid, and sent on their way. What would happen to the various prisoners, Ferris himself, or even the facility, was of no concern to the Dire Swords.

Perhaps Lord Indron would encourage the staff to remain on site since life bonds were still part of the Grotto system, even if reduced as a result of the strike. It could be that the gunslingers would be given the opportunity to buy their way out of captivity. Those who survived and their parent company would no doubt have some degree of

available resources, and nobody wanted to be pressed into a Grotto penal legion if they could afford to avoid it. Maybe Ferris Basepholon would negotiate a modest term of surrender and find himself returned to the planet in his executive capacity, with a missive to execute a freshly minted mining venture between Basepholon and House Indron.

It was entirely possible that this was a punishment assault meant to force a trade deal between Basepholon, House Indron, and by extension, Grotto Corporation. Once all the blood had been cleaned and the bullet holes patched, the survivors would simply return to work, perhaps a little wiser as to who was truly in charge.

For the Dire Swords, none of that mattered.

They arrive, they fight, and they leave.

There was a freedom in that, Jada thought to herself; this was indeed a new paradigm for her compared to being a salvage marine, in which the story of a place and its people often defined the salvage in varying degrees.

The path of the mercenary was one intentionally divorced of context, an endless war without narrative and Jada found that she was relieved by that emptiness. Once the mercs left this planet, that would be the end of it.

3. THE TRAIN JOB

“If it wasn’t such a rush, I’d say thievery was beneath us,” laughed Poe through the private battle buddy channel he shared with Jada as the dropship reached a higher speed in order to keep pace with the mission milestones. “Work like this seems more suited to pirates than the Merchants Militant.”

“Marius used words like ‘asset seizure’ and ‘high-value target’ in the briefing, that makes it sound more official,” countered Jada as she toggled through the target finder modes in her HUD while safely harnessed to the deployment rack in the belly of the dropship. “Besides, no way could a gang of pirates pull this kind of op, there are seasoned battle troopers on that train.”

“Fair point. I’ve only gone up against them once, on Gedra Prime, and admittedly I was impressed,” agreed Poe as the dropships sped over the vast and sun-baked shale plains that covered the majority of the unknown planet’s surface. “Strega was Helion before she expatriated about twenty years ago, though she was a tanker, not infantry.”

“I’ve been fighting them sporadically for half my career. Since Grotto crossed the Ellisian Line, it’s become routine,” stated Jada, taking note of the snake-like image of the approaching train being painted on the wall mounted mission screen. “Helion battle troopers are volunteer soldiers with profit shares, not the usual conscripts and convicts fielded by Grotto, or even fixed rate contractors like us. They’re trained, equipped, and invested in their cause.”

“Then we’re in for a proper fight,” said Poe, the harsh light of yet another dying sun glinting off of the skull etching on his face plate as the launch bay of the ship opened for the rapid deployment descent. “That’s why all of us are here anyway. Nobody ever became a Dire Sword for the money.”

They fell silent after that, each lost in their own thoughts as the ship closed the distance between them and their target. Jada could feel the sticky gloom of the Deepspire against her skin, the smell of dark tunnels and industrial waste sharp in her nostrils. The rush of pending violence always brought on the hallucinations more vividly, and she, as did the rest of the mercs, worked to push them to the back of her mind. Deep breaths, one after the other, slowly cut through the smell of decay and ruin.

The Dire Swords mantra, we fight as though dead, was repeated over and over in her mind as well as the others, filling her consciousness with the task at hand and driving out the bitter memories that clamored for her attention. The pain in her muscles

was a haven, and she sought a keen awareness of her body, a war machine barely held together within the boundaries of her dusky skin.

There was poetry to it, Jada thought to herself, the temple of the body as a sanctuary from the terrors of her mind. To become the perfect warrior, she had to face daily the very nightmares that had driven her away from her Reaper comrades and onto a more pure path.

Jada knew that Poe was right, that she, like the rest of the Dire Swords, cared little for the vast sums of money she now earned as a member of the Merchants Militant. In a year with the mercs, she had already accumulated more wealth than she'd earned in the first half of her service as a Reaper. Granted, much of that wealth had already gone towards her buy-in fee to the Merchants Militant, the cost of her treatments, equipment, and dues to Sword Base. Yet all of that mattered little when Jada was honest with herself; it truly wasn't about the money. Out here, kicking up shale as she hurdled towards furious combat against formidable foes, she was free.

The ghosts that clung to the veteran soldier were shaken loose in the melee. The burdens of culture, politics, and economics were cast off as she exchanged their weight for that of the mag-armor. Her yellow eyes burned behind the etched skull of her helmet and that became the face she presented to the universe.

"Overwatch reporting. Raid Alpha, two minutes to contact," said Marius over the company channel, broadcasting from Sword Base as he and the mission control staff used the ship's long-range sensory equipment to monitor activity in the target area. "Good hunting."

Jada's heart began to beat faster and she flexed her fingers in anticipation before taking a firm grip on the rungs of the deployment rack, knowing that the safety harness would detach without warning once they were in drop range.

Their mission was a daring one, and Poe wasn't out of bounds to describe it as something closer to an act of piracy than it was a stratagem of war.

Grotto and Helion might not have been slugging it out in epic-scale conflicts the way they were a year ago, and they certainly weren't attacking each other's holdings in mapped space as they had been in the past, but there was still much in the way of corporate bloodshed in necrospace.

Well inside the boundaries of Helion territory, there was a small solar system that had yielded evidence of a noticeably stronger presence of organic corporate units. While much of necrospace, on both sides of the Ellisian line, was full of independent contractors and scavenger soldiers engaging in continuous struggles with one another in the name of this corporation or that, the masters of Helion seemed

to have something different in mind for this particular system. The clandestine operatives feeding that information to Grotto Corporation had indicated that Helion was committing its own internal military and industrial elements to the system, instead of the various subsidiaries and subcontractors used by both Grotto and Helion now that the trade war had all but ended.

According to the available intelligence, presented to Jada and the others by Marius in the mission briefing aboard Sword Base, major excavations were underway on each of the six planets in the system. While some of the data pointed to a variety of industrial plays, most of the recon seemed to reveal that the excavation had non-industrial purposes, though what exactly that might be remained a mystery.

The usual heavy equipment that would be present in raw material extraction was not present in most of the sites; instead, smaller pieces, more difficult to identify given the limited intelligence available, were being used towards an unknown purpose. While archaeology was certainly suspected, given the data available, it was still thought to be highly unlikely given the lack of profitability of such endeavors.

However, the fact that Helion was expending a tremendous amount of resources towards the, as yet, unknown endeavors, made it necessary for agents of Grotto to disrupt those activities. Two great houses, couldn't, by their nature, allow the other to gain without offering contest. So it was that the Dire Swords had been pulled back into the fight. House Indron had been paying the mercenary company a modest retainer to remain this side of the Ellisian Line, making low-risk security patrols throughout Grotto's newly won territory, their notorious presence serving more as a deterrent than anything.

For many months, the mercs had little to do but train and occasionally rattle their sabers, as it were, to ward off scavengers and would-be smugglers. It was a waste of their talents and their time, though the promise of Augur tech made from re-furbished and re-purposed Gedra tech had kept Womack and Marius amenable enough to maintain the arrangement.

Jada, like the other mercs, was glad to be back in the field, for idle time was torture to a Dire Sword, both literally and figuratively. She was no different from the rest of them, as the mission clock showed one minute to contact, they all sought solace in the pure insanity of active war. There was always a war that needed fighting somewhere in the universe and within that truism lay the blessing of being a mercenary and not a corporate citizen. Today's war was with Helion, and soon enough, the campaign of disruption that the mercs had been sent to execute would be underway.

The dropship was flying dangerously low to the ground in order to baffle whatever on-board scanners the train might have active. As

the dropship crested a low hill, the train was quite suddenly in view and Jada realized just how confusing the seemingly flat and desolate landscape of this alien world could be.

It appeared to be flat from an aerial view, but from the ground perspective, it was filled with peaks and valleys. Combined with the blinding glare of the shale in the dusk-like light of the dying sun, it became exceptionally difficult to judge distances and obstacles. As it was, the dropship and the train were nearly on top of each other before any line of sight was established. Jada knew that the split second that happened, the fight would be on.

Above them, dirty clouds hung low in the sky, only they weren't so much clouds as whirlwinds of shale dust that were perpetually caught in a cycle of updrafts and downdrafts as the wind whipped across the surface of the planet.

Much like the other dead planets in this part of the universe, it had been ripped apart by whatever industry and warfare had come along and caused the end the civilization that had given birth to the Gedra machine race and their tombs. Also, like the others, this planet had been stripped of the most common raw materials, though a number of the more rare commodities that fueled the corporate civilization remained in abundance.

According to recon data, this planet had yielded what appeared to be a healthy crop of urium crystals, which, when ground into a fine powder and refined for use, was the primary component in starship fuel. While alternative fuel sources existed, such as cold fusion hydro-turbines and solar power cells, the vast majority of ships in the universe still contained urium engines.

As with all things in the corporate world, there would be little incentive to modify the technology until those who profited from the old tech could find a way to maintain their wealth on the other side of such a transition.

"Incredible, look at the size of that thing!" shouted Berg as the ship cut across a low valley so that they could remain out of sight for just a few more crucial moments while they closed distance with the head of the train.

Jada nodded in silent agreement with the merc's assessment, as it was indeed one of the largest mechanized vehicles she had ever seen, outside of starships in drydock. As she looked upon the train she began to understand the real scale of their mission and saw precisely why Grotto had chosen to send a small band of elites instead of a larger force.

The train was a hover-rail, capable of moving at magnificent speeds over land. According to the mission brief, the bizarre gravitational properties of the planet combined with its irregular

orbital path made it inefficient for the construction of a starport close to the urium mines. While urium was volatile indeed and a certain safe distance was obviously a concern, the starport had been built on the literal other side of the world. This allowed the cargo haulers to break atmosphere and set a trajectory for Helion space without expending an amount of fuel equal to what they were hauling out, while making the hard burn necessary to escape the gravitational pull of both the planet and the dying sun at the same time.

The sun was already beginning to exert pressure on the planet. Though it would still be many thousands of years before the planet was consumed by the embryonic black hole, the invisible physical forces were already making industry difficult for the humans attempting to plunder the planet's remaining riches.

The train was forty cars long, and every fourth car was topped with a crew-serviced weapon. The dropship pulled out ahead of the train and the pilot pushed the thrusters to their maximum capacity, outpacing the train.

The hostiles instantly began to train their weapons on the interloper. The head of the train was a wickedly armored engine car that bristled with mounted plasma-lances and an auto-cannon turret, all of which opened up, though the pilot weaved side to side and avoided most of the incoming fire.

As the tail gunner inside the dropship exchanged fire with the train's head, the dropship hit the pre-approved drop point on the track. The pilot pulled up hard on the controls and banked at a ninety-degree angle, testing the very limits of the machine's structural integrity and the capacity of the thrusters. The hostile gun crews tracked the bird as it screamed upwards, but their bullets and plasma bursts fell just behind it as the ship disappeared into the clouds. The train plowed onwards as the ship rose out of sight, though keeping pace with the train had never been the full scope of the plan.

The mission clock hit zero, the drop siren sounded, and it was time for Jada to make her first non-simulated combat drop.

"We fight as though dead!" shouted Jada, adding her voice to the nine others in the belly of the ship as the safety harnesses de-coupled and the mercs flung themselves from the ship in pairs.

The ship was moving at such a tremendous speed and they were already high enough that a trooper without a chute would have splattered against the shale surface of the planet. The Dire Swords were masters of assault drops and their armor was expressly designed for just such a purpose. An assault drop required great precision to be effective and it was something at which the Dire Swords excelled. While other mercs, such as the Folken, used more blunt tactics like combat pods and heavy armor, the Swords preferred a sharper

approach.

Jada found the sensation of being in freefall particularly exhilarating, and she could not help but grin as she saw the cloud bank looming beneath her. The micro-shards of shale dust scraped against her armor as she and the rest of the mercs descended through the clouds and her vision was temporarily blurred by it. Her helmet's HUD tracked the train, which had continued along its path, though given the length of it, her systems estimated that she could land somewhere upon the final quarter of the cars.

The mercs broke through the other side of the clouds and immediately saw the train rushing to meet them. The gunners had been tracking the dropship and were still doing their best to aim upwards, but moving at such speeds had dramatically reduced their vertical accuracy. Some of them spotted the ten bodies falling from the sky, and of those, a handful had the reaction time in which to fire.

A jet of plasma burned nearby her, and Jada held a begrudging respect for whoever had been quick-witted enough to realize the merc's ploy. Jada's HUD lit up red and she knew it was time to activate her dropshield.

The mercs trained for hundreds of hours to ensure that they could stick such precarious landings, and though Jada had done so many times, this one was under fire and outside the controlled conditions of the simulator. Hard rounds whizzed past her as more gunners desperately brought their weapons to bear. The merc crossed her arms and ignited her shield.

The energy-spools in the greave plates that protected her shins and the vanbraces that protected her forearms roared as they uncoiled. The compressed energy of the crackling threads erupted outwards, creating something of a barrier between her armored body and the gravitational pull of the planet itself. The momentum of her descent was pressed back on itself as her descent slowed slightly. A millisecond before she slammed onto the roof of the train car, the shield dissipated. The blowback of the energy release was enough to send a shockwave outwards in a circle around her, and it knocked a nearby Helion trooper off of his feet and sent him sailing off of the train.

Jada had aimed her body with immaculate precision and landed on the thirty-seventh car, with a few meters to spare on either side of the massive train.

In the blink of an eye, Jada slid her sidearm from its holster and fired magnum rounds through the faceplate of another trooper, one who had been nearly fast enough to bring her rifle up and squeeze the trigger. The merc surged forward into the press of bodies, not giving the assembled troopers a moment's respite. It was this blitzkrieg-style

of close quarters fighting that had won the Basepholon facility so swiftly, and while the vast majority of the mercs had sustained minor to modest injuries that would have slain normal humans, there had only been two fatalities. Even the veteran Helion troopers were hard pressed to resist the armored giants effectively.

At point-blank range, Jada drove her pistol under the chin guard of another trooper and squeezed the trigger, putting all of her weight behind pushing the enemy's body against one of his comrades. Armor smashed against armor as Jada shouldered her way into the gunnery nest, using her superior size and strength to knock over the two soldiers pushing against her and the dead man she was using as a makeshift shield. She lashed out with her off-hand and punched a third trooper hard enough in the chest that he lost his balance and fell backwards, the burst from his sub-machine gun going wide.

Several hot rounds bit into her mag-armor and Jada's HUD went haywire with damage reports. She knew in an instant that one of her kidneys was ruined. The merc's armor was potent, but the Helion rifles were famous for their armor-piercing capabilities, especially in such close quarters.

She would have collapsed to the ground in pain and shock, soon to be lifeless, had she not been so empowered by her gene therapy. Her blood was already clotting and her tissues were striving to re-knit themselves. Before, she'd have bled out in moments, assuming the shock hadn't thrown her into cardiac arrest. Without pausing in her assault, Jada turned and knelt, firing her pistol on the offending trooper.

Helion battle armor, even the standard issue, was some of the toughest in corporate space, but the impact from her magnum rounds were enough to shatter the trooper's rifle and knock him off of his feet.

Jada stood, and with her other hand, ripped the assault rifle from the mooring pegs on her back, at the same time lowering the muzzle of her pistol to fire the last round of the magazine into one of the two prone soldiers she'd knocked over moments before. At that range, his armor wasn't enough to stop the powerful pistol from pulping his internal organs as it went through his chest.

Jada was mechanical and methodical in her rifle work, a quality that had served her well as a Reaper and made her devastating now that she had a more finely tuned body with which to apply that skill. Where her assault with pistol and fist had been a chaotic melee, once the rifle was in her hands, she became a different sort of warrior. With rapid precision, she raised the weapon to her shoulder, holstered her sidearm, and began unleashing death all around her.

The rifle itself was a new model, one of the long-promised pieces

of modified Gedra tech. She understood little of the science behind it. It was enough to know that Grotto and Augur engineers had found a way to remove the 'gun' parts from the gun spiders that protected the tomb-worlds and turn them into a formidable weapon for the merc's use.

Once the fleshy parts had been removed and the complex circuitry extracted, the basic frame of the weapon was of peerless quality. The Gedra frame could be retro-fitted with existing projectile systems. Something about the physical properties of the metal and the inherent rifling of the barrel gave hard rounds a unique ballistic profile when fired. There were a great many theories as to how exactly it worked, some insisting there was a psychic link between the shooter and the target, others that there was an unmeasured, yet quantifiable, quantum relationship between the shooter and the target which allowed the rifle to shape the projectile in such a way as to maximize its effectiveness.

When Jada needed her rounds to have the knock down power of hollow point rounds, the bullet would shape itself accordingly as it passed through the rifling of the barrel. The same was true if she needed armor-piercing rounds. It was strange, and it defied known science, though for the mercs, application, not theory, was all that mattered. They cared little for the why or the how, only that the weapon was effective and gave them an edge over their opponents.

A trooper opened fire with his rifle just as Jada cut loose with hers. The Gedra weapon gave her the exact rounds she'd needed, which were flechettes. She marveled at the power of the weapon as it sent her bullet screaming from the barrel in a cloud of metal splinters. Her hail of flechette rounds bit into the bodies of both the rifleman and the sub-machine gun-wielding trooper as he attempted to get back to his feet.

At such close range, they were all but shredded by the metal storm she subjected them to before Jada turned and stitched four rounds into the trooper who had wounded her, hitting him in the knee, mid-section, chest, and shoulder before he collapsed.

She could see other Dire Swords engaged in similar frenzied melees on the train cars ahead and behind her, though, as was protocol, she focused on her battle buddy.

Poe had landed ahead of her and was grappling with two Helion troopers, both of whom had discarded their rifles and attacked the merc with shock batons. The electrical discharge from their bayonets were locking up Poe's armor, reducing his ability to end the fight quickly. It seemed he'd used his drop impact and pistol to clear out the rest of his enemies, but he was losing the fight.

No sooner had Jada assessed the situation than one of the

troopers leapt back and his comrade lashed out at Poe with her baton once again. The discharge from the woman's strike locked up Poe's armor on his left side, giving the other trooper enough time to pick up a rifle and drive several rounds through Poe's chest.

Jada answered with shots of her own, calmly breathing out as she sighted in on the gunman first. Her burst of fire tore holes in his chest plates and blood exploded from his back as the Gedra rifle answered her needs. She then moved to the woman who dropped her baton and scrambled to yank her sidearm from its holster.

The first round took her in the hand that pulled at the pistol, the second and third sent her lifeless body sprawling across the roof of the train. The merc lowered the muzzle of the rifle to put a round through the head of the last trooper, one of the two she'd tackled to the ground, and then sprinted across the train car towards her fallen comrade.

Jada leapt across the small gap between the train cars and immediately hit the deck as machine gun fire swept across the air where she'd been moments before. Poe's car had been the furthest back that the mercs had dropped onto, car thirty-six, and as Jada looked behind her, she could see that they had all but seized the four behind her. Helion troopers were firing back down the line now, desperate to hold their position.

Jada low-crawled across the roof of the train car until she reached Poe. It was a small mercy that the gun emplacements provided a decent amount of cover, though had she dared stand up, she'd have been cut to pieces. That was a concern for later, she told herself, for now there was her battle buddy to attend.

"You alive in there, battle?" asked Jada as she toggled over to their private channel, ignoring for a moment the overwatch updates that were coming in over the company channel.

Poe moved his hand to give her a thumbs up, though he said nothing. Jada could see that there was blood splattered on the inside of his faceplate, somewhat obscuring his features. It made the etching of his skull seem all the more gruesome. For a moment, Jada wondered how terrible it must be for their enemies to face such images in the heat of combat. The merc grabbed Poe by the mooring pegs on his back and slowly dragged him across the roof of the train car until they were right beneath the edge of the gun emplacement.

"Is your HUD operational?" asked Jada as she opened a pouch on Poe's utility belt and grasped a clamp that had a tethering line spooled inside.

The wounded merc held his hand up once more with a thumbs down as Jada affixed the clasp to one of the utility moorings on the gun emplacement, effectively tethering Poe's body to the armored

nest.

“I have to keep going, Poe,” said Jada gravely as she gave his ravaged body a once over, realizing that she and her partner were going to have to rely on his enhanced physiology to keep him alive until the medicae could get him into surgery. Overwatch monitored all of their vitals and radio traffic, so they would already know to have med-bay prepped for Poe’s arrival, assuming he survived to mission completion. It was this acceptance that nearly every merc on the mission would be wounded that gave the Dire Swords additional degree of power, as they relied much on their meta-human bodies to absorb the heinous damage that they regularly endured. It was in this way that even just a handful of Dire Swords could engage an enemy easily ten times their strength in numbers.

There was no time to hesitate; the only way out of the situation was to continue the mission and she hoped he understood that. Jada nodded her head, though he couldn’t see her when the wounded man turned his thumb back up.

Rounds had torn into his lungs, which was likely why his helmet was awash in blood from the inside, and yet somehow Jada imagined he was smiling behind the skull. Poe was the odd man out among the otherwise downcast mercs. Even though Jada, too, was disposed to bouts of melancholy, she was happy to have been paired with the man.

She silently wished him luck and then used her HUD to activate the micro-magnets in her armor that would allow her to move more fluidly over the train cars. As she switched back to overwatch channel, she discovered that of the ten mercs who made the drop, only eight managed to land on the train, the other two having missed the train and were awaiting pickup from the dropship.

There were other Dire Sword elements on the planet, some raiding the mine itself and others running decoy missions in the ATVs to occupy the myriad security forces, but given the mission timetable, it was now up to the eight mercs remaining to complete the task at hand.

“Overwatch,” spoke Jada into her comm-bead, while she began to move, staying low to avoid enemy fire as the other mercs exchanged salvos with troopers in the next car, “Poe is secured. Proceeding.”

Jada crawled across the top of the train car and slid herself over the side, using the climbing magnets to stay affixed firmly to the surface of the car. Mors was already working his way across alone, his battle buddy Strega having been one of the mercs to miss her landing and the two of them continued their approach near the bottom of the car.

The shale ground moved past her in a blur of dull browns and

blacks, only an arm's length away. The train was moving fast enough that a single errant arm or lost footing would catch the ground and rip the mercs off of the speeding vehicle. Thankfully, the angle was just right for an approach, and the embattled troopers defending the car from above were as yet unaware that death crept up from below.

Above them, a brutal clash was in progress as Womack and Taymar led Berg, Ranec, and the others across the top of the train. The potency of the Gedra rifles was game-changing, and by the time Mors and Jada had traversed the thirty-fifth car, the mercs on top of the car had seized it.

"Raid Alpha, be advised," crackled the voice of Marius in everyone's comm-beads, "Elements from the fore section are moving up to reinforce the aft positions."

"Copy that," responded Womack over the company channel, and then followed up with, "Raid Alpha, let's push hard! I want half this train before we dig in!"

"We fight as though dead!" bellowed Ranec as he leapt across the gap between train cars while firing his rifle into the Helion defenders.

Below the firefight, Mors held tightly to Jada's arm and she shut off her climbing gear, pushing off the side of the train with her legs. Mors grunted and used the momentum of her launch to swing Jada around in a wide arc that placed her at the front of the next car. At the last moment, Jada activated her climbing gear and planted herself firmly against the side of the car. Once she was secured, Jada, still holding the other merc by the arm, repeated the maneuver, only this time it was Mors who flew through the air before smacking into the side of the train.

The fighting and moving continued liked that for what seemed to Jada like forever. Her world had shrunk down to nothing but climbing and leaping, and she put all thoughts of what might be happening above her out of her mind. In these moments of maximum exertion, there were no hallucinations, no moments of past horror come back to haunt her, only the purity of motion and violence.

There was a kind of tranquility in the cacophony of gunfire, and in those moments, Jada felt at peace. There was a deep sense of camaraderie as she once more hurled Mors across the gap in train cars and against the side of the next one, because she knew that her feelings were identical to the rest of the Dire Swords.

Though she and Mors did not speak, there was a silent understanding, and it made Jada think of the long extinct wolf packs that stalked the ancient worlds she'd learned about during her compulsory education. It was said that some of the frontier planets had similar creatures, though she'd never before cared to delve further into the subject. Such was the Grotto education and mindset; if a topic

was not functionally relevant to one's immediate circumstances, it was generally ignored.

"Ranec, pull back! This is as far as we go!" shouted Berg suddenly, breaking the radio silence that had given way to the hurricane of gunfire what seemed like eons ago.

"Get that auto-cannon online!" barked Womack, and within seconds, the deep bark of the mounted weapon added its voice to the choir of violence above.

Jada and Mors kept moving, as fast as they dared without alerting the Helion troopers to their presence. The mercs above were pressing hard, though they'd only been able to seize about two-thirds of the train. The defenders were bringing up reinforced barriers, likely attached to the front of the train, as if they'd expected a more direct attack on the main engine as opposed to a drop assault from the rear.

An explosion rocked the train, and Jada saw the body of a Dire Sword being flung away from the speeding vehicle. There wasn't any blood spraying, so perhaps the merc would survive the concussive explosion and resulting collision with the hard shale ground. For now, she couldn't think about that and Jada returned her attention to reaching the front of the train.

Mors tapped her thigh from his position below her and pointed once she was following his eye line. Jada saw that the next two cars of the train were manufactured with a different shape than the rest of the cars. They were covered with interlocking plates of multi-sectional machine gun emplacements.

To Jada's eyes, it looked as if the builders of the train had wanted the front of it to look and function more like the body of a crustacean, where a tough exoskeleton protected the body beneath. She realized that once she and Mors reached the next car, they would not be able to use stealth, as they would be forced to scamper across the ever-shifting plates while the gunners attempted to track them.

"We'll have to blast our way in," observed Mors. At a nod from Jada, the man produced several det charges from his utility belt and affixed them by their release clips to his mag-armored forearm. "Maybe this car so that we can seize the bridge without losing the train."

"I'll get their attention, you plant the charges," said Jada as she turned and began to climb up to the top of the train car, where several troopers still held their positions, most of their comrades having gone back down the line to hold the train against the merc assault.

Jada gathered her strength and launched herself up and over the side of the car, using her momentum to roll onto her back and then rise into a crouching position. In a blur of motion, she pulled the Gedra rifle from its mooring peg and sent a trooper sailing off of the

train with a quick burst of fire. With cold precision the merc dropped the other two troopers who were defending the car, one of them collapsing in a heap with bullet holes in her chest and the other taking one knee as his other was blown out by a hollow point round. The merc slung her rifle and launched herself at the wounded trooper, grasping him by his shoulder armor.

With a grunt of effort, the mercenary planted her feet and heaved the trooper up and over her body, twisting her torso, ignoring the pain of her own wounds as she did so. Jada let go of the trooper and he hurled through the air over the gap between the cars and towards the gun emplacements.

The gunners inside the multi-sectional emplacement opened fire, unsure of whether the armored figure sailing towards them was their own or one of the fearsome mercenaries. In that split second of time, Mors appeared in the gap between the cars and waited for his moment, which came swiftly.

As the gun emplacements all followed the trajectory of the doomed trooper, the gaps in the layered plating revealed themselves. They were only a few inches wide, but just enough for Mors to stuff two of his charges through the gaps and then dive back down for cover.

Jada hit the deck of the train car, both to shield herself from the pending blast, but also to avoid the hot rounds being fired at her from a trooper on the car behind her who had noticed the sudden attack.

Seconds later, the double crump of both charges detonating were more felt than they were heard. The armor plates of the gun emplacement shrieked as they were torn apart from the inside by the contained explosion.

Without waiting to assess the damage, Jada leapt off towards the chaos of the exploded car. She landed heavily, shaking the battered car, her booted feet sending splashes of flaming gore in every direction.

As Mors had intended, the force of the explosion had been momentarily contained by the plates themselves before a secondary explosion of the ammunition magazines had ripped the car apart, jagged sides blown outward like some huge metal flower. However, many gunners there had been inside the car were now all part of a virtual soup of blood and pulped body parts.

Mors heaved himself over the plates to join her in the ravaged compartment, and together they advanced towards the engine car with their rifles raised.

She could see the face of a Helion staffer, probably an engineer or co-pilot, staring out at her through the fire-streaked plexiglass viewport in the car ahead and the man was visibly weeping with fear.

At this stage of her life, Jada was numb to such tactical horrors. She had to acknowledge that the sight of two armored warriors with skulls for faces wading through a lake of burning blood would sorely test the resolve of any sane human being.

As one, she and Mors fired their rifles and the strange Gedra tech anticipated their need for armor-piercing rounds. The hard rounds shattered the viewport and drove into the face of the weeping man, sending him sprawling out of sight behind the door. More concentrated fire from the mercs tore apart the locking mechanism. While Jada covered him, Mors yanked the hatch open.

"Merchants Militant! Stand down!" bellowed Jada through her loudspeaker as she entered the engine car. As her HUD swiftly adjusted to the gloom of the compartment, she saw that there were four train staffers in engineer jumpsuits who had their backs against the wall and one cor-sec officer still cradling his weapon awkwardly in his hands, as if he was in shock and could not get his body to let go of it as commanded.

"Comply!" added Mors as he moved in behind Jada and put a round through the throat of the cor-sec officer, who finally dropped his weapon and fell to the deck clutching his fatal wound.

The others threw themselves to the ground as Jada and Mors secured the engine chamber.

"Pilot, halt this train!" ordered Mors as he pressed the still-smoking muzzle of his rifle against the head of a woman with pilot's bars on her shoulder. After the cold execution of her comrade, there was little for the woman to do but comply. "Jada, cover the rear."

The merc might have been a veteran killer, but Jada was still getting used to the brutal efficiency of the Dire Swords when it came to the capture and motivation of prisoners. To a degree, she understood the pragmatism of asserting dominance, and that even if he was in shock, the cor-sec officer didn't drop his weapon when ordered. That was a risk that the mercs simply couldn't take, even if such executions challenged what was left of Jada's salvage-based foundation with regards to the conduct of war for profit.

As high-speed warriors for whom there was only the objective, the Merchants Militant had neither the inclination, nor the time, to concern themselves with the paradoxical notion of waging 'humane war.' For them, the only rule of engagement was victory; there was no space in the mind of the mercenary for hypocrisy.

Perhaps there was a bleak sort of purity in that, thought Jada as she took up a firing position in the ruined gun emplacement. The stench of the burned bodies was filtered out by her helmet's on-board systems, though her memories and imagination filled her nostrils just the same.

She had little time to consider her mental state as a Helion trooper attempted to rush her position from the car across from her.

The man had been sprinting, but came up short, faltering in his steps as he saw the nightmare that had been made of the gun emplacement. He may have been so shocked at the bloody scene that he did not see the skull-faced death dealer crouching in the half-light of the ruined metal. Whether he did and could not react, or if he had simply been robbed of the will to fight in that instant, was inconsequential, as a burst of armor-piercing rounds from Jada's rifle punched through his mid-section and sent him tumbling off the train and out of sight.

The second trooper was made of sterner stuff, and crawled on his belly over the top of the car to exchange fire with Jada. Neither of the combatants was quite able to get their bearings on the other.

With Mors at her back, the pilot must have made quick work of shifting the controls, because after the first few exchanges between Jada and the trooper, the train's brakes became fully engaged.

It was a technological marvel and a true achievement of engineering and industry that despite the tremendous tonnage of the train, when the pilot engaged the controls, the train swiftly came to a halt. It was a controlled stop, smooth and without the final jerk of momentum that Jada would have expected.

The familiar engine scream of the Dire Sword dropships could be heard now that the wind of the speeding train wasn't whiting out all of the other sounds. The shooting continued, the Helion troopers who still defended the train not quite realizing the extent of their defeat, or perhaps their commitment to Helion was sufficient enough to keep them fighting to the last. The trooper on the car seemed to be of the latter mentality and he kept up the pressure, sending multiple hot rounds into the ruined train car before Jada was able to flush him out with a grenade. The explosion knocked the armored opponent off his perch and sent him flailing out of sight.

"Strega was Helion," said Mors as he stepped out of the chamber to join Jada. She looked behind Mors to see that the pitiless merc had permanently ensured that none of the engineers would be attempting to get the train started back up. "She said that the battle troopers in her day were loath to retreat, and without any support here, I suspect these will fight to the last man or woman."

"That's been my experience," agreed Jada gravely as she and Mors began advancing to the next car, each of them slapping in fresh magazines in preparation for what was to come.

The two mercs carefully mounted the train car and were met with the sight they had expected. The remaining Helion troopers held what appeared to be three cars, the rest of their comrades having perished

or been knocked off the train before the great machine had been halted. They did indeed seem intent on fighting till the bitter end.

"It is glorious, is it not?" asked Mors as he and Jada bounded across the open train cars to close distance with the defenders.

"Well, they probably think they're dying for something more than money," answered Jada as she took aim at one of the troopers, the defenders not yet realizing that they were caught in crossfire. "Helion propaganda is some of the best in the universe."

Mors grunted with what sounded like laughter, and joined Jada in firing upon the embattled troopers. The two of them poured on the fire, sending one trooper to the grave and driving two more back into cover behind their horribly dented mobile defenses. Mors kept shooting while Jada slotted in a fresh magazine, her last. She was glad that the battle was winding down, as there was only this magazine and the handful of shots left in her pistol.

A gun went off next to Jada. She looked up, not recognizing the sound of the weapon, her HUD lighting up with effort as it dampened the concussive report so close to her skull.

Mors sank to his knees beside her. His faceplate was cracked and painted with blood from the inside, giving the skull etching an eerie red glow. He fell forward to the deck.

Jada reacted out of instinct. Her pistol was in her hand and her finger squeezed the trigger before she realized what she was doing. She turned her head in time to see that she'd put a magnum round through the stomach of the pilot who had stopped the train. The woman fell back, the force of the bullet at such close range sending her lifeless body to the ground. Jada saw that she already had a ragged wound in her chest. In her hands, she clutched the stubby weapon the cor-sec officer had been holding before Mors shot him. Obviously, Jada realized, Mors had thought he'd killed the pilot, but missed her heart.

Even with her comrade dead beside her, Jada found herself thinking about the sheer will the pilot possessed to have taken up that weapon and reached the mercs before succumbing to her mortal wound. To have watched Mors execute her comrades, be shot herself and yet survive to take vengeance, like Mors said, thought Jada, it *was* glorious.

Jada sat next to Mors for a long time, leaving the rest of the fight to others. Her mind wrestled with the natural attempt to categorize Mors as a good man or a bad one, and the merc knew it was just a psychological coping mechanism. The attempt to reconcile a person's life into a single value judgment was a fool's errand, but one common when faced with such sudden death after so troubled a life.

She wondered what would be thought of her once she died, and it

was therein that she felt a sudden kinship with the dead mercenary. Perhaps he, like her, had died a long time ago on some distant battlefield and only now had his body finally caught up to that fact.

The combined crossfire made short work of the remaining defenders, and by the time the dropships arrived, the last Helion trooper was shot down. With the dropships came several haulers, barges that had been retro-fitted by their employer to seize the train's precious cargo.

The Dire Swords pulled security on the train itself as the dropships ran long-range pickets across the shale, though no Helion counter attacks came. The rest of the planet's defenders were either defeated or otherwise engaged with the rest of the Dire Sword elements and the haulers were free to do their work unimpeded.

Jada wasn't surprised to discover that the haulers had been retro-fitted by a company of salvage marines, or that it was a Reaper tug that waited in low orbit for the crystals.

Now that the starport was either theirs or soon would be; moving the stolen goods would be easily done. To her knowledge, the plan was to seize enough material to cover the cost of the expedition, then destroy the rest. They were here to disrupt Helion, not conquer territory.

If they couldn't steal it, a raid they would ensure that Helion would not be able to recover it.

4. DEAD ALIVE

Jada knew that but for the margin of chance, it would have been her crossing the mineshaft instead of him, her shattered helmet on display in the temple's central altar instead of his.

Mors was dead.

Jada was alive.

There seemed little difference between them beyond the obvious carnage of a body riddled with bullets. Jada had looked into the eyes of the Hollow Horde several times now, and there was a kind of light behind those dead eyes, a spark, and where there was such a spark perhaps there was life, or something that resembled it.

During her time in necrospace, she'd fought the re-animated bodies of fallen penal legionnaires, Helion troopers, and even a few salvage marines. They moved and made war like any other living being, only she knew for a fact that they'd died before being reborn, so to her, the line between life and death was arbitrary relative to technology.

Perhaps, at one time, there had also been a religious component to the understanding of mortality beyond the cold facts of science. Cold facts which were being turned on their heads by the existence of the Gedra, yet such things had been abandoned long ago by corporate society. Spirituality was a concept all but lost in the grinding gears of chronology and commerce, so there was little thought given to death, or life, beyond measureable data.

The truth was that Mors was dead, and had been so before his body had even hit the ground. It reminded her of the men and women she'd seen over the years who were hit by artillery fire, their bodies shattered or destroyed entirely in the blink of an eye without any warning that they were about to meet their doom. At least most soldiers in a firefight have some concept that they could die at a moment's notice.

As Jada looked at Mors' helmet perched atop a small altar at the center of the temple, she wondered if the man had accepted that his life could end at any moment, or if he at least expected to know death was imminent seconds before it arrived.

As Jada took in the full sight of the temple, for the first time, she began to feel as if she was achieving an understanding of the phrase 'fight as though dead.'

Mors had been a Dire Sword for fifteen years; before that, he'd been a cor-sec officer in the Rubicon Corporation and had earned his data coins during a brief and bloody civil war deep in central Rubicon space. He was like the rest of the Dire Swords, having walked over

countless bodies along the path of his life, leading up to the moment of his death. It could have come for him at any of hundreds, perhaps thousands of times in the past, before finally claiming him.

His helmet would be enshrined upon the altar for several days before being placed on one of the many shelves in the temple. The chamber had no name beyond simply being referred to as the temple. The contents were what gave it gravity, not the name placed upon it. The many shelves were packed with helmets, some of them badly damaged and others less so, all of them etched with the skull face of the departed bearer, a shrine to death, but also a monument to life. Every Dire Sword casualty since the founding of the company had a helmet on display.

Even those who were lost entirely had fresh helmets created to hold their place in the temple. This was the eventual destination for all who took up arms with the company, serving as both a source of fierce pride and a callous reminder of the doom that awaited them all.

Jada was comforted by the empty stares coming from the helmets, the hollow eye sockets of the skull etchings seeming to follow her no matter where in the temple she stood. Others had come to pay their respects, various support staff and warriors filing in and out of the temple. She stood alone for a moment, watching Strega reach out with her bare hand and place it upon the helmet as she whispered something. She then left the temple and Jada could not help but follow her with a gaze, noticing how Strega looked rather emotional when touching the helmet, but was as expressionless as ever when she walked out.

Ranec, who had been standing silently on the far side of the temple, met Jada's eyes as the woman looked back towards the helmet. There was heat in his troubled gaze and Jada was stirred by a sudden animal need.

The warrior, apparently noticing her reaction to his silent statement of desire, walked across the temple towards her. The merc said nothing as Ranec came nearer, his approach slowing the closer he got to her, until he came to a stop only inches away from her. He stood just to the left of her center, leaving her plenty of room to maneuver around and past him should she choose. Jada held his gaze and stepped towards him, closing the distance between them as she put a hand on his chest and pressed her hip into his.

Shortly afterwards, in the privacy of her chamber, Jada ran her hands down his muscled and badly scarred chest, tracing the lines of past injuries with her fingers and marveling at the scale of damage that Ranec had survived in his long and violent life.

His body was slick with the sweat of their exertions, the two of them having wasted little time in undressing and taking one another

in arms once the door slid shut.

The man was an enigma. His recklessness on the battlefield ran counter to the delicate way he made love to the newest Dire Sword. From the way he fought, she'd have expected him to embrace her roughly, the way most soldiers did things, herself included. Not so with the otherwise savage warrior, who thrust himself into her with a deep and abiding power, his massive frame above her feeling more like he was shielding her from the outside world than he was towering over a lover.

The merc moved her hand up the ridge of hard tissue that marked where the Gedra cyborg had torn Ranec open before Jada moved in to rescue the man. Thanks to the gene therapy, only the most grievous of wounds left scars and Jada wondered how many of the ones she caressed had been carved into his flesh before he was transformed.

Ranec appeared to be experiencing the same musings. The warrior tightened his grip upon her and rolled them over on the bed. Jada looked down at the man as he thrust upwards, taking note of how he traced the ravages that a lifetime of violence had left upon her. His hands slid up her waist and found the ragged scar upon her chest, where she'd taken a bullet during a boarding action years ago, the long surgical scar that bisected the circular wound where the Grotto medicae had inserted the Augur lung that had kept her at peak fighting condition. Her remaining organic lung, now enhanced by the gene therapy, performed just as well, if not better, than the Augur organ, a testament to the power of the serum and the resilience of her body to cope with such continuous trauma.

Ranec's hand went from her chest to the ring that dangled from her throat, and as his fingertips brushed against it, the two lovers locked eyes. They held each other's gaze silently for a moment, him questioning and her answering, an understanding passing between them that not all scars were cut into flesh.

Ranec thrust upwards, wrapping his arm around Jada's waist so that he could sit up. The merc wrapped her legs around his waist and they were brought face to face by their position. They held the pose, grinding their hips together as they shared the same breath, their lips never quite touching as the two soldiers lost themselves in the moment.

Jada had tried to let go of George Tuck, a fellow Reaper who had died down in the darkness of Vorhold some years ago, attempting a number of times over the years to forget him in the sweaty embrace of another. The specter of him yet remained and she knew that it was she who held tightly to him.

Somehow, Ranec was giving himself to her, without armor or reservation, but Jada could not manage the same. Whatever post-

traumatic burdens the Dire Sword carried, Jada could tell that he had found a way to set them aside for the time being. Perhaps it was the sex that enabled him to let go of his past, to experience a few passionate moments of raw humanity before returning to the armor.

For most of the mercs aboard Sword Base, it was only in the fury of battle that they found such respite, and yet, with Mors gone, she knew that everyone was on edge. Likely there were plenty of mercs who paired off after leaving the temple, either with each other or one of the support staff. Not unlike Ranec and Jada, they needed to feel alive, and without a fight waiting for them, many of the haunted warriors turned to sex. It wasn't like any of them could get drunk anymore. Their advanced physiology made it all but impossible to imbibe enough alcohol to overpower their body's ability to process the liquor.

Jada remembered how George had always enjoyed getting a few drinks in them and grappling in a dark corner of the barracks.

Instantly, her physical bliss turned to something else.

She had left the pits of Vorhold a half-person, a sad and wounded thing, and in a way, she was ashamed to have survived when so many others had not. George had made it out; he could have left her there and reached the sunlight alive, but instead had gone back into the darkness to save her and take her place in death.

Jada would have insisted that he let her go, that after even her brief captivity at the twisted hands of the Stalkers, she would rather have died in that bitter place. George had robbed her of that choice, he and Boss Marsters, and even the ganger Vol.

Suddenly, Jada was furious that it was she who yet clung to life. Having Ranec inside her was a frustratingly pleasurable and forceful reminder that she not only lived, but was thriving as a grim bringer of destruction to any unfortunate enough to be on the other end of her weapons.

Ranec's firm, but gentle, lovemaking suddenly annoyed her, as if he was wasting the power in his enhanced body, holding back when he should be pushing her and himself to the edge of exertion. They were meta-humans capable of feats beyond the natural capacity of humanity and they were both holding back. What was the point of all the suffering they'd endured up to this point if they did not go all the way? Jada found herself enraged.

She snarled and twisted her body, using her arms to shove Ranec onto his back, squeezing her thighs together, holding him inside her while the pressure of her legs kept him from being able to draw a full breath.

Ranec let go of her and she pinned his arms against the bed, all the while grinding her hips into his. The Dire Sword was impossibly

strong, and he pushed up against her, both with his sex and his arms, even as Jada thrust back against him with hips and hands.

They were opposites in that way, Jada realized. Ranec was a bravo in combat, but more poet than beast in his sexuality, while Jada was a warrior of cold efficiency and now a ferocious creature who tore at his flesh even as she coupled with him.

Ranec was visibly concerned with the swift and aggressive turn their intercourse had taken, though the allure of the savage beauty writhing on top of him kept the man fully engaged.

Jada leaned down and dangled her necklace against his face and he seemed to finally understand what was happening between them. This wasn't about the two of them at all, more that it was about Jada and the ghost of the man she'd once loved.

Ranec's lips parted and he took the ring into his mouth, closing his teeth around it and tying Jada to him by the chain as they continued to collide with one another. The merc's eyes were ablaze with a blend of intense passion and something akin to madness as she growled with climax.

They did not speak after, as they had not spoken in the beginning, their silent communication somehow capturing their mutual understanding more profoundly than unwieldy linguistics. They lay together, bodies entwined, neither able nor interested in sleep.

Their bodies, enhanced as they were, revealed an appetite for more than just calories and hydration, and the next time they coupled, it was a calmer, almost mechanical affair, as Ranec held Jada's back to his chest while they embraced. This time, it wasn't about Mors, or George, or even the passion that had temporarily ignited between Jada and the man whose life she had once saved.

Neither of them had what it took to love another human being, at least not in the way they once had, though there was a comfort of a kind in companionship. The passion of their initial encounter, realized Jada, as she pleasantly pushed back against Ranec's slow thrusts, was about loss. This second encounter, more methodical and yet more honest, was where the real intimacy between the mercenaries was revealed. They were living weapons, and all weapons needed to be maintained. Like a gun needed oil, cleaning, and ammunition, so too did the body need sustenance, sexual release, and rest. There would be no love between Dire Swords, but there would be respectful care and attention of all the weapon's needs.

There was little acknowledgement between them when they were reunited hours later on the training deck. To Jada, it seemed that all of the Dire Swords approached the day's PT with the same cool detachment that they usually did.

The mercenary's muscles burned as they struggled to push against

the magnetized resistance of the training bar. Jada was once more shocked at how, despite the difficulty, she was able to lift it to full extension. There had been a time when she'd watched Harold Marr, the largest and strongest salvage marine in Platoon Tango, struggle mightily to lift less. Jada breathed in and lowered the bar once more to her chest as she lay prone upon one of the many workout benches on the PT deck of Sword Base.

After seizing the urium train, the Dire Swords had been spending their time aboard Sword Base as the merc battleship performed more low-risk patrols of Grotto held territory this side of the Line. Occasionally, there would be a ground engagement, usually just pushing out pirates or squatters looking to snag a few resources before being noticed.

The cold spots and the ghost signals on the scanners had become commonplace, having been encountered over and over by the mercs as they executed their duties across the newly founded Indron sector. On the average punitive run, Jada could see dozens of them through her instruments as Poe drove next to her in silence. He, like the rest of the squad, found that it was easier not to think about the oddities of these cities of stone, and to focus on the mission at hand. They had long agreed amongst themselves that these were likely alien cities, crafted with some, as yet, unknown technology, though the cold spots and signals were a matter of some debate during the few idle hours the mercs endured aboard Sword Base.

Jada knew that all of them had questions aplenty, but the Dire Swords were professional soldiers, and asking questions wasn't in the contract. Neither was passing judgment on the particulars of any given mission, with regards to the client's overall stratagem in the sector, the goals of the enemies, or any other value assessment that was not related to the tactical reality of the pending conflict.

Mors was gone, but life aboard Sword Base continued as always. Jada felt, hefting more grav-plates onto the exercise bar for Poe as the man worked through his first set of reps, that it was this return to normalcy that showed respect for the fallen. The temple's interior window was set so that the helmets upon the many shelves could look down upon the living, to bear witness.

Jada found herself wondering how long it would be until her own helmet sat upon those shelves and finding there was a comfort in the certainty of its eventuality.

5. DEPLOYED RESOURCES

Briefings among the Dire Swords reminded Jada greatly of the many others she had sat through during her time as a Reaper of Grotto Corporation. She supposed that most military briefings were much the same, and, as with many things in the world of modern war-making, the similarities tended to stay in line with maximum functionality.

Just as the soldier in the field using iron sights lined up the back of the rifle to the front, so it was that the living weapons of war were prepared for their deployment. The metaphor worked for her, more so now that she was part of a military unit named after a weapon, and she felt in those briefings as if she were being aimed at her target. There was a freedom in being loyal only to the contract, a kind that she had not felt during her years as a salvage marine, even if in truth, that was the world she'd been living in without realizing it.

There were plenty of stories on the lit feeds and the vid sites that depicted great heroes on battlefields of ancient history and imaginative fantasy. They usually involved somewhat simple plots, wherein a hero would rise from the ashes of some tragedy to embark upon a quest of one kind or another. Generally, there were strong notions of good and evil, right and wrong, who was the hero and who was the villain.

She had enjoyed such stories in her youth, especially the lit feeds, as the heroes in such tales were nearly always from the elite classes. They were lords and ladies, great warriors and fair maidens, always placed in situations where there was a clear choice to be made and a comfortable definition of victory.

Yes, thought Jada, listening to Marcus detail the progress of other raids on planets within this enigmatic system, disrupting Helion's as yet unknown set of goals, those stories were comfortable. So too, were the histories she'd learned in school, where this nation attempted to conquer that nation, or this tribe battled that tribe over territory or feud. Always, the choices were clear and the victory complete, but these were the most ancient of histories, and as history progressed towards her own time, the nature of warfare changed and what it meant to be a hero changed with it.

There was little narrative in modern warfare. Her experience of war was compartmentalized, and Jada knew now, after many years of violence, that it was the same for all corporate soldiers. Individual battles were disconnected from one another in the mind of the soldier, as they were not privy to the greater unfolding of events. There were no righteous causes in the corporate world, only a struggle for

recourses, territory, and profits. There was no cause save the bottom line, and this was not an age of heroes.

Briefing.

Mission.

De-Briefing.

Rest and Refit.

Repeat.

That was her experience of war, so it caught Jada by surprise when Marcus addressed the core goal of their pending mission.

"This mission is what the Ellisian War has been all about," stated Marcus as he commanded the rapt attention of everyone in the briefing room. "We have reached the apex of every corporate endeavor since first crossing the Line."

Marcus turned from his lectern and gestured to the long-range scan readouts being projected onto the high wall behind him. A cascading series of images played across the screen, each of them showing various depictions of massive excavation activity.

The sight of them turned Jada's stomach, as if there was something intrinsically alien about the angles of those stones, the way rock and earth flowed together mixed with the hard edges of Helion excavations. It was as if the alien planet obeyed different laws of physics, fighting against the introduction of humanity and its love of right angles. She had been on several planets this side of the Ellisian Line since the trade war and had experienced the strange formations that had been revealed to be cities. However, it wasn't until she saw the raw images of humanity's efforts to dig up this ancient and alien realm that she truly understood how different their civilizations had to be. One was ancient, elegant, and long since departed, the other contemporary, brutish in its greed, yet very much present.

"Our employers have determined that theories of previous alien civilization are correct. As many of you have rightly observed, the 'ghost' effect on short-range sonar fits with predictable models of pedestrian and mounted traffic and habitation if one supposes that the flowstone areas are in fact ancient urban zones," stated Marcus as he displayed a number of scanner readouts showing the ghost effect. Jada even recognized some of the readouts from her own ATV deck in the presentation.

"While we are still determining the technology which allowed for such harmonized structure planning and execution, especially considering the environmental ruin that has been made of these planets, the official determination is that these are all cities of varying size and chief industry. We cannot presume, at this point, what the exact relationship was between the afore-mentioned inhabitants and the Gedra machines, though we are certain a connection exists. The

key to that connection, and perhaps Ellisian space at large, appears to lie within the carcass of this planet."

Marcus toggled over to a view of scanner photos that depicted semi-circles of various sizes jutting up from the flowstone in dozens of excavation sites, each one larger than the next. The final photo Marcus left on display, zooming in several degrees to give the attendees of the briefing a more complete view of the ring.

Around it was a dig crater easily the size of a starship. Jada realized that she was looking at an excavation site that dwarfed any other she'd seen. In the harsh light of the dying sun, she could see that the ring was made from some manner of polished flowstone and that, more than anything, led credence in her mind to the theory that this ancient civilization had some way to shape the very landscape. Humans were adept at tearing up the land, processing it, and building something else with it, but to shape the land without changing what it was to begin with, that was something that almost seemed too advanced to be witnessed outside the lit feeds and vid sites.

"Augur specialists have analyzed these images and theorize that what you see before you is, in fact, a weapon, or to put a finer point on it, the ultimate weapon. It is believed that an, as yet, unknown energy source powered the rings, and that the weapon built up a charge as energy passed from one ring to the next, until finally reaching this master ring for discharge," reported Marcus, who then turned from the photo to look out at the audience. "This could very well be the weapon that wiped out all civilization in this part of the universe. The discharge of the weapon may have been what initially created the temporary, even if long-lived, Ellisian Line itself."

Marcus stopped speaking for a time, allowing the knowledge to sink in as the Dire Swords scrutinized the photo before them.

Jada was beside herself, as never before had she felt like she was part of a series of unfolding events, rather than just a simple hired gun and outside observer. She had been part of the initial military expedition into the tomb-world, and suddenly her mind was overwhelmed with the memories of hurling herself at the cyborg that had killed Patrick Baen and so many others.

Her fingers flexed around the hallucinatory handle of her boarding knife as her muscles recalled the sensation of burying the blade deep in the metallic flesh of the machine. She had been one of the first human beings to fight the machines and live; then again on Gedra Prime, she had found herself face to face with another cyborg. Jada found her center amidst the pain in her muscles, and used her breathing techniques to bring herself back to reality, only to be met with a close up shot of yet another cyborg on the far wall behind Marcus.

“As you can see, when I zoom the image to its maximum capacity, there is a great deal of digital artifacting, such are the limitations of our technology when faced with the incredible amounts of environmental interference; however, you will see that there is a humanoid being at the center of the lower arc of the master ring,” observed Marcus as he pointed to the extremely pixilated image of what could be one of the titanic cyborgs that commanded the tomb-worlds, or at least something similar, only this one seemed to be less of a machine and something more of flesh. “What you do not see, in fact, is the reason for the choice to move so rapidly into mission execution.”

At last, thought Jada to herself as she looked at the photo being zoomed back out by Marcus to reveal the full crater, they were going to be told why exactly they were flying straight through a void fight.

Jada barely registered the occasional tremor in the ship’s hull, and without being privy to the instruments on the command deck, the merc was barely aware of the carnage unfolding in space around her. All that the mercs had been told so far was that a small Grotto battle fleet was riding escort alongside Sword Base so that the merc ship could enter a low orbit over the target planet.

It had been many months since House Indron committed resources to the field, preferring to have the Dire Swords maintain fear and order in the sector. It chilled Jada to think of the countless lives being lost in that very moment as Sword Base streaked through the void, slamming through the thin security picket that Helion had put in place.

Like most of the other military efforts in this sector, both Grotto and Helion only a maintained cursory military presence, just enough to deter scavengers and pirates, though for the choice plays, it seemed both corporations were prepared to re-escalate hostilities quite readily.

“Take note, there is a significant lack of activity on the surface of the excavation site. Something this size should be swarming with labor crew and security details,” stated Marcus as he went back through the photos in addition to displaying a number of force strength charts. “Given the observable equipment and functional structures on the site, it’s estimated that there should be upwards of three hundred or more labor crew members and a full company of battle troopers, plus additional armor elements.

We see none of that in our recon data; there is no visible activity on the surface, though we have seen evidence of a battle, a recent one. You’ll see several bombed-out buildings and we have confirmation of at least one smashed grav-tank. Our working theory is that something similar has happened to the Helion staff as was experienced by Grotto

penal legions during several previous engagements against the Gedra."

With that, Marcus yielded the lectern to Womack, who stood up from his seat in the front row to address the audience.

"The mission is a basic smash and grab, the only difference is that we are doing the smashing while these gentlemen do the grabbing," growled Womack, and then he extended his hand to point out the three men who had been seated with him, all new faces to the mercs in the audience. "Our employer has engaged the services of the Tasca cartel, and these are three of the high-speed operatives."

At the mention of Tasca, there was a palpable shift in the room. The general opinion of the Tasca slave cartel and its operatives was poor amongst the mercs, who saw the professional slavers as something less than hired soldiers. Nobody said anything directly or openly, but the multitude of voices whispering to each other was obvious.

Jada's pulse quickened. She'd not thought of her combat against Tasca operatives in a long time, and the feeling ignited her aggression. She was not the only one, as it seemed a few others in the crowd, notably Ranec, were visibly upset by this news.

One of the Tasca operatives turned in his seat to face the crowd. For an instant, he and Jada stared hard at each other before Womack's voice cut through the room.

"Spare me your outrage, people," spat Womack as he held his hand up, gesturing for silence. "The contract negotiated with House Indron allows for this sort of task force joint operation, so button it up and act like professionals."

The noise in the room died down and everyone gave Womack their full attention as Marcus brought up an approximate schematic of the excavation site.

"We're dropping a full company, by standard raiding, squat right into the excavation site. Your job will be to press a hasty attack towards the master ring, eliminate anything that gets in your way, whether it's Helion, Gedra, or scavengers we don't know about. The idea is to stir up the hornet's nest and blast whatever comes out," said Womack. The audience's general mood seemed to improve somewhat at that. This sort of wild assault was exactly how the Dire Swords preferred to wage war. "While we keep the action going, the Tasca element will be in their own ship circling above. Once we draw out the Objective, they will capture and extract."

Poe frowned, raised his hand, and asked, "Grotto and Helion both have been trying for a long time to get their hands on an operational alpha cyborg, and not once has anyone succeeded. They either kill enough people that they have to be put down or they self-destruct. What is going to make this op turn out any different?"

“That is a fair observation, Poe,” nodded Marcus as he spoke from beside the lectern, “However, we are positive that this is not a cyborg of the kind we faced on the tomb-worlds, but is, in fact, something new. It is highly possible that whomever, or whatever, this thing is, it could be part of a progenitor race, the makers of the Gedra. Perhaps it is simply another sort of cyborg; at this point, we don’t know.”

One of the Tasca operatives stood and faced the audience. “I would point out that, to date, the Tasca have not been included in any operations upon tomb-worlds controlled by Grotto or Helion.” He was an older man, whose weathered face had no doubt seen much of this strange and violent universe, “We are the foremost hunters in necrospace when it comes to the capture of humans, or in this, case humanoids. I believe we have a reasonable expectation of success, considering the data made available by our mutual employer.”

“This is just as much about disrupting Helion as it has ever been,” added Womack as the Tasca operative returned to his seat. “They put a vast amount of resources into this play, and whatever they found down there dealt them a serious blow. We’re here to twist the knife.”

“We will make orbit within the hour; drop coordinates and ship assignments will be uploaded to your HUD in the next few minutes.” Marcus brought the lights in the briefing room to full illumination, signaling that the briefing was concluded, “Good hunting.”

Jada thought she had done well in the briefing when faced with the Tasca operatives. Like the rest of the mercs, she had taken twenty minutes of rack time, getting just enough sleep to sharpen her senses, before going to the med bay to get her serum booster. She was calm and ready to focus on the mission, though as she walked into the launch bay where the dropships were being fueled and prepped by the deck crew, she was sorely tested once more.

Jada was the first of the Dire Swords to enter the bay. The Tasca operatives assigned to the mission, Ellis, Jean, and Najib, according to the specs that were uploaded to her HUD, were all busy putting the finishing touches on their own dropsuits. Each of them was encased in the high-end armor for which the slavers were known, and it was upon seeing that familiar sight that Jada’s adrenaline surged.

Being in the briefing with them was one thing, but actually seeing their armor and those cursed automatic pistols with the extended clips, just like the one that killed Spencer Green when she’d been with the Reapers, was more than she could bear. Jada had not felt this strongly since the battle on Gedra Prime, when she and the other salvage marines had their first re-match with Helion battle troopers since the conflict on Tetra Prime that had claimed Boss Maggie Taggart and a number of other marines.

The image of Spencer's mangled corpse leaking crystallized blood droplets as it hung in space was vivid in her mind as Jada stomped across the launch bay. She wasn't sure what she was going to do when she reached the men, but it wasn't going to be pretty. She felt as if gravity was giving way, and all she could think about was the sick nausea in her guts as she recalled taking aim at the comatose Tasca victims and pulling the trigger.

"Hold it, Bright Eyes," whispered Ranec, who suddenly appeared just to her side, his strong arm locking around her waist, stopping her momentum, "Whatever you're seeing is over and done. Nothing you do here will change that."

Jada stopped in her tracks as Ranec held her. For a moment, he wasn't her lover, but Samuel Hyst giving her the order to fire and the last of whatever innocence she'd clung to was gone.

She turned with a snarl, though when met with Ranec's deep brown eyes, the heat boiling in her brain abated somewhat. She took deep breaths that started as a gasp. After several seconds, she was able to banish the memories, dissipate the hallucinations, and return to full control of her mind and body.

"Never seen you go that deep," stated Ranec as he slowly relaxed his grip on her and stepped back.

"Caught me by surprise is all," said Jada. She shook her head and squared her shoulders, nodding to Ranec. "Thanks. See you aboard."

The merc looked over his shoulder at the Tasca operative, Ellis, who was walking aggressively towards the pair. Ranec turned back to Jada and shook his head.

"Slaver filth," he spat as he clapped Jada on the shoulder and turned to walk towards the dropship boarding ramp.

"You got something you wanna say to me, merc?" asked Ellis, who walked directly in front of Jada and looked up at her, intentionally ignoring how much larger she was. "You've been eyeballing me ever since the briefing, so I figure you either wanna get off or grapple. Which is it?"

"Either would leave me wanting," scoffed Jada, unable to stop herself from lashing out with her words and yet pleased that at least it wasn't her fists.

"This is neither the time nor place, Ellis," snapped Najib in a distinctly Grotto accent that took Jada by surprise, given that so few Grotto citizens ever left the corporation. As he moved to intercept the man, the two of them stared daggers at each other, until Ellis looked away and stepped back from his superior.

"I don't need a bunch of stone cold killers looking down on me for slaving is all; it ain't like their trying to hide it," growled Ellis with anger brimming in his voice and his fists clenched. "I got mouths to

feed, same as anybody."

"Let it go, son," said Najib as he placed his hands on the slaver's shoulders, holding the man's gaze. "Prep the nets and help Jean calibrate the cage. We aren't hunting humans this time anyway, so I don't think these good people will suffer temptations to shoot us in the back."

Ellis threw a final defiant look at Jada and spun on his heels, heading towards the launch deck where the other Tasca operative assigned to Raid Alpha was tinkering with what Jada recognized as a stasis cage. It appeared to be heavily modified from the versions that she'd seen during her violent encounter with them back when the Reapers spent most of their time operating scrap wagons and picking the bones of void battles.

"You must forgive my associate; he is temperamental even on his best days," apologized Najib as he turned to face Jada, his weathered face revealing a smile even though his eyes were some of the coldest she'd ever seen. "He's one of the finest huntsmen in the cartel, even if he is somewhat new to the profession, hence his oversensitivity with regards to the opinions of others. I assume you do not approve?"

"The Merchants Militant are the finest killers money can buy, and our loyalty is always to the contract," answered Jada as she fought through a wave of pain that crackled up from her spine to her neck, indications that her serum booster treatment was beginning to take effect. "We are weapons to be hired and we do what must be done to honor the contract. I know I cannot pass judgment on other professionals of violence, even if I personally find your chosen field to be particularly vile."

"You kill people so that your employers can control their resources. We capture people so that our employers can turn them into resources. I find there to be little functional difference in the morality of our professions," observed Najib, the smile never leaving his face as the two of them watched Ellis and Jean cranking the high-velocity nets through the spools of the casters. "Each and every one of us, from the lowliest salvage marine of Grotto to the most resplendent warrior of Errol, is a party to oppression. Moral relativism is the only way to maintain one's sanity in this new, dark, age. I can hear the Grotto upbringing in your voice, so I am sure you know all about doing what must be done to keep your mind in one piece."

"That sounded awfully rehearsed, do you have this conversation often?" asked Jada, allowing herself a grim smile as she went about checking the seals on her armor while they talked.

"All the time," laughed Najib while the other Dire Swords of Raid Alpha began to finish their pre-drop checks and make their way to the dropships, "Slavery is a vital component of most economic models and

an inconvenient truth. Even if some corporations choose to use penal codes or acts of war to re-classify those human resources, all of them work hard to keep it out of sight. Working alongside high-end slave hunters like us, well, that forces people to acknowledge it, and reminds them that they are party to it."

"It reminds me of something my father said once, about his time in the Baen penal legion," commented Jada while she checked her magazine and the safety of her sidearm before re-holstering it. "If you pay taxes, then you are part of the system and you have a share in every victory and every tragedy. I never gave it much thought until I became a Reaper; now, I can't tell if I have PTSD or if everyone else does."

"The universe is a hard place, and humanity hasn't yet discovered a way to live in harmony with itself. In the meantime, we must each make our way," agreed Najib before placing his helmet over his head and affixing the seals. "You can wrap yourself in platitudes and hope for the best, or you can open your eyes and see that only the strong survive. Nobody gets away clean, this is the job."

"I'm not going to shoot you in the back, Najib," said Jada as the two of them started walking towards the dropship. "That's not part of the contract."

The slaver laughed out loud, his shoulder shaking from it, and Jada found herself wondering which of them was worse, the slaver, with his threadbare philosophies about survival, or the mercenary, who killed for coin. She didn't even have anyone she was taking care of, no loved one she fought for, and very little to do with the wealth she'd acquired.

At least the brash operative, Ellis, claimed to have people who were reliant upon him to get paid; she didn't even have that flimsy excuse for the atrocities she inflicted upon the universe. She understood that if it wasn't her standing with the rifle then it would be someone else, and she might as well fight and earn, but that line of thought, too, was threadbare.

We are the ghosts of good people, thought Jada as she looked upon the other members of Raid Alpha who had already boarded the dropship and strapped themselves in, fit only to fight monsters and tread upon the grey wastes of necrospace. Let those like Samuel Hyst convince themselves that they'd earned their peace. Jada growled inside her mind; this violent life was at least an honest one.

Perhaps that was why Najib's cheap musings had struck her so profoundly. Out here on the bleeding edge, in the company of slavers and mercenaries, a person could wear their trauma on their shoulder and be met with understanding by those around them. There was no place for judgment in this vast nightmare of space, only the

acknowledgement that they had all gone too far to come back.

They might as well get paid for it.

6. RAID ALPHA

“Overwatch reporting, one minute to drop!” the voice of Marcus came over the comm-bead’s company channel.

“We’re up against hollows, so remember center of mass and head shots are the only things that put ‘em down for good,” said Berg, using the raid channel that directed his voice to the other five mercs in his squad. “You can’t bleed out if you’re already dead.”

Jada looked at the warriors who surrounded her and wondered how many of them would die today. With every mission, there was an assumed risk; it was why the soldiers of fortune were as expensive as they were. For all their gene-therapy, costly armor, and advanced weapons, they were still mortal creatures and subject to the perpetual grind of time and chance.

Osric was a testament to this truth. He was the man who had replaced Mors as Strega’s battle buddy, bringing their squad back up to full strength. They certainly expected to need every available rifle at the ready.

There had been a robust security force of troopers protecting the excavation site, several hundred labor crewmembers and at least one battle tank. Whatever happened there went down fast, and it was a shame that the environmental interference was so thick that more recon data wasn’t available.

Jada could only assume the worst, that there was now hundreds of Hollow Horde down there. The re-animated bodies of the dead, modified with machine parts in the subterranean forges of the Gedra. However, this was not a tomb-world and that being didn’t appear to be one of the alpha cyborgs. None of it made sense, and here they were, about to assault drop into the middle of the deadly unknown.

Only those who fought as though dead would conduct combat operations in such a way, and that was both the gore and the glory of the Dire Swords at war.

The drop siren blared and the belly of the ship opened. Jada was immediately buffeted with the caustic wind that dominated the landscape. She realized instantly why the dropships were making wide circles just outside the excavation site. Jada leapt out of the ship and began her descent, taking note of the thick cloud banks that gathered over the excavation site, impressed that the recon scanners had been able to gather any intel at all.

She could see the engine exhaust ports of several other ships burning through the gloom and the dark shapes that leapt from their bellies. There were thirty-six Dire Swords dropping out of the sky to bring violence against whatever awaited below.

As Jada plunged through the bottom of the cloud bank, she was met with her first full view of the excavation site. It was shockingly unlit, as if all the power had been shut down. Not a single artificial light burned. Her HUD painted the ground below using sonar, so that at least Jada could direct her fall towards solid ground and keep herself from crashing into scaffolding or through one of the multitudes of bombed out buildings. No anti-air batteries opened up and no infantry rifles hurled rounds up at them. The mercs were greeted with an eerie silence as they began to engage their dropshields.

Jada slammed into the dusty floor just inside the deep walls that had been cut through the flowstone. Her descent had given her some idea of just how deeply the Helion crews had dug in order to uncover the master ring and the alien sprawl that surrounded it.

Whatever happened here had been quick, and it was likely that the only reason Helion had not been able to respond was the continuous attacks by the Dire Swords on other worlds in this system. The mercs had kept Helion scrambling to cope with their lightning assaults and security forces and were now spread thinly across the whole system. With an entire archaeological site going dark just as the mercs were smashing the urium plays on another world, it was likely all Helion could do to mount a modest void defense to at least keep the main Grotto fleet engaged. It was possible that Helion troopers were not even aware that a tactical insertion was taking place.

It wasn't until Jada was on her feet and hefting her rifle that she considered the idea that Helion knew exactly what had happened here and perhaps was staying away on purpose.

In moments, Jada closed the distance with her battle buddy, Poe, and soon after they were joined by Berg, Ranec, Strega, and Osric. For a time, they stood in stunned silence, facing all directions in a loose defensive formation. All of them shared looks, and Poe shrugged as if to acknowledge the strangeness of it all. The only sounds that could be heard were the rapidly fading engines of the dropships as they returned to meet Sword Base for re-fueling and the dwindling hiss-pops of dropshields impacting as the last of the mercs made planetfall.

"We should be hip deep in bad guys by now," snarled Ranec as he scanned the darkness ahead of him. What little light there was came from the dropships above, reflecting briefly off of the skull face etched into his helmet.

To date, corporate forces had only engaged Hollow Horde enemies that had been recently created and they were slow combatants. Even though they were shambling corpses re-animated by an, as yet, unknown means, even they would have reacted by now.

Jada began to wonder what the cyborgs might have done had they been given more time with their creations. Suddenly, the merc

became concerned that there had been a glaring oversight in their intel.

Berg gave the signal to advance and the six mercs moved forward, each of them scanning the darkness for signs of the enemy they knew had to be lurking there. In the near pitch black, even with their HUDs at maximum aperture, it was difficult to judge distance or maintain full spatial bearing, as everything looked like the same series of dig pits, scaffolds, and stairs leading up or down. It wasn't until they reached a bombed-out building that they were able to make sense of their position. There was a Helion building, likely a pre-fab that had been airdropped, which looked like it had been formerly a mech bay. Jada recognized the distinct shape of the doors and the multitude of loading tracks embedded into the floor.

"Labor mechs," said Jada as she ignited the light on the end of her rifle and shone it into the depths of the bay.

"This place is a freaking maze!" grumbled Poe as he ascended a series of steps that the Helion engineers had cut into the smooth curve of flowstone that led upwards and around the side of the mech bay. "I'll bet you anything Helion has their compound connected with tunnels of their own, drilled right through the site."

"A door at the bottom of a hole," whispered Jada as she moved her light back and forth, yielding some small additional illumination.

"You say something?" asked Poe as he turned on his light and the two of them proceeded into the darkness of the bay side by side.

"Thinking about old times. Listen, as we go, be sure to check your back shadows and blind corners," said Jada as she swept her rifle back and forth ahead and behind her. "Basics of hostile salvage, I have a feeling this won't be the kind of stand-up fight we thought it would be."

Poe nodded silently and the two of them pressed onwards, then after a few steps, Jada suddenly stopped. Her instincts were screaming at her to flee, but she held her ground. Poe didn't seem to feel what she did and he followed her lead. The mercs slowly retreated backwards, never allowing their aim to waiver as they pointed their weapons into the black. When they reached the entrance of the mech bay, they were joined by the others, all of whom were at the ready.

Moments passed, and then the rest of the mercs began to grow restless, as if they too were beginning to feel the monstrous danger the same as Jada.

What emerged from the shadows of the docking bay then was something out of the most raw nightmares in the human psyche. It was clearly one of the Hollow Horde that all of the Dire Swords had faced back on Gedra Prime, but unlike any hostile they'd seen so far.

It had once been a Helion battle trooper. It still wore most of the

carapace combat armor, though the bodyglove beneath it had torn through in places. The flesh underneath the armor had been bleached, as if all the vital fluids had been rerouted elsewhere and thick cables could be seen buried in the creature's exposed joints. The human hands had become elongated claws, metal blades crudely grafted to the fingertips that had torn through the tiny plates of armor that comprised the former trooper's gauntlets. They twitched incessantly, clicking together as the creature approached.

The helmet was gone, from the back of the misshapen skull a nest of cables protruded. The glare of the creature's (for it had long since ceased to be a man) eyes were now yellow, smoldering exhaust ports.

The creature opened its mouth, threw its head back, and howled. The jaw split down the middle and spread wide to reveal a maw filled with what looked like a blend of chainsaw teeth and sewing needles as it pushed it's formerly human vocal cords to the limit. The sound that came forth shook even the hardest of the mercs to their very core. None of the warriors present had faced something so horrifying, save one, and even she hesitated for one critical moment.

When it didn't seem possible that it could get worse, four hinged metal protrusions suddenly snapped out from the cradle on the creature's back, additional limbs tipped with what appeared to be metallic stingers.

Jada tried to blink away her shock. For a second, it was not a Gedra abomination that stood before her, but the Stalker in the Dark.

Faced with her greatest foe, Jada still recognized it as her conscious mind attempting to make sense of what she was seeing. The storm of traumatic memories flooded her mind even as her body was racked with the sensations of her combat injuries, and worse, at the hands of the Stalkers. She recognized what was happening and let the hallucinations wash over her, embraced them.

As the other mercs stood in shocked disbelief, it was Jada Sek alone who acted.

She screamed as she raised her rifle, the hinged stingers tracking her movement, making her realize that they were actually small firearms, each of them seeming to be corporate weapons that had been re-fabricated to fit the Gedra.

The merc and the beast fired at the same time. Her modified Gedra rifle produced a salvo of armor-piercing rounds that punched through the Helion armor with a resounding crack.

The four modified corporate weapons of the Gedra beast sprayed a multitude of hard rounds at the squad, seeming to opt for a group attack over concentrating its fire on a single target.

While Poe and the others had been frozen in terror and shock at the sight of the vile beast, the explosion of gunfire snapped them out

of it.

The squad scattered as they were pelted by hails of bullets, most of the projectiles being turned away by the stout armor worn by the mercs. Berg, however, jerked and fell backwards as several direct hits knocked him off of his feet.

In the back of Jada's mind, she observed with interest that the abomination's cannibalized corporate weapons did not have the same reactive connection with the user that the Gedra modified rifles allowed. That was a small boon, and it spared the lives of the squad, as they dove in all directions to avoid enemy fire.

Jada strode forward, heedless of the handful of rounds that spanked off of her armor. She snarled as she squeezed her trigger over and over. The merc drove round after round through the chest and neck of the creature, cutting short its furious assault. Jada's rounds tore pieces of flesh and armor away from the creature's body, forcing it to stumble sideways from the impacts. It screamed defiantly before Jada sent a burst of fire through its horrible maw and out the back of its skull.

In the rush of battle hormones and emotion, Jade had not even noticed the two rounds of enemy fire that had managed to bite through her armor. Her right thigh, just above the knee, seeped blood from a bullet that had managed to impact hard enough to drive a splinter of her own armor into the meat of her leg. The other was her right arm, just at the elbow, where a round had grazed the joint section and taken a piece of her flesh with it. Her enhanced physique was struggling to cope with what, to Jada, were minor wounds, though any unenhanced warrior would have lost the use of their right arm and left leg and surely been out of the fight.

"Contact!" barked Womack over the comm-bead, "Confirm Hollow Horde elements, heavily modified, they look to have been Helion."

"Well, that's at least one mystery solved," muttered Poe as he helped Berg to his feet, the merc seeming no worse for wear.

"Contact! On the surround!" shouted Strega from far to Jada's left. The merc turned her head to see Strega looking at her mounted short-range scanner, "I've got pings on three-sixty degrees!"

"Raid Alpha, stay on mission, engage and eliminate on your way to the master ring, don't let them lead you down a murder hole!" commanded Womack over the company channel. "Let's get what we came for and evac so we can nuke this site from orbit!"

"*Guns up!"* shouted Berg as he fired a beacon flare in a high arc across the excavation site. As the flare hung in the air and began its slow descent, it illuminated much of the site that had been shrouded in darkness. Seconds later, its light was joined by a number of flares

from other squads as they all worked their way through the massive excavation site.

Jada's HUD immediately registered the beacon embedded in the flare projectile, and it served as a rally point for the squad. Given the near pitch darkness of the battlefield and the chaos that was likely to ensue in a matter of seconds, the rally point would be critical for allowing the squad to regroup. Even with the flare's temporary illumination, the helmet's low-light settings were cranked to maximum, and Jada knew this was going to be a nightmarish conflict fought out in the half-light.

As if in step to the rhythm of her mind, everyone's HUD was awash in hostile contact as the enemy surged out of seemingly every deep shadow cast by the light of the flares. This time, none of the mercs shouted out the Dire Swords battle cry; it went without saying. They were in the depths of necrospace, fighting shoulder to shoulder with hardened veterans, while surrounded by darkness and bitter enemies. Death at this point was assumed; the only question remained was who would fall and who would remain standing.

Jada raised her rifle and fired as she caught movement out of the corner of her eye. The Gedra rifle, anticipating her needs, fired a burst of low-velocity tracer rounds, the accelerant of the cartridge having been put towards creating the brilliance at the cost of knockdown power. Still, a bullet was a bullet and several of them pounded into the flesh of the creature as it leapt from the shadows. The creature lost its footing due to the multiple impacts, though that did not stop it from firing wildly with its four gun appendages. Poe lent his fire to Jada's and the two of them blew the creature apart with a combined salvo.

Behind them, Ranec rushed a network of scaffolding, aiming his weapon up to reveal several of the creatures moving through the ironworks with a sickening grace.

The merc's precise shots caught one of the hollows in the mid-section and it nearly fell off the scaffolding. Its clawed hand caught a rail just before it fell, holding its weight as the wounded creature dangled from its high perch. The beast returned fire and pushed Ranec scampering into cover to escape the hurricane of small arms projectiles that chased him.

Berg took a knee, and with a single shot, blew apart the creature's hand before it could transfer its aim from his battle buddy to him, sending it plummeting down and out of sight behind one of the many flowstone walls.

Strega and Osric ran across the flowstone parallel to each other, pouring fire to the left and right of the pair as they followed the arc of the flair.

Under the cover of their fire, Berg and Ranec were able to concentrate on gunning down another creature and as its ravaged body fell to the ground the six Dire Swords closed ranks with their battle buddies and pressed the assault.

"Reloading," said Osric calmly, swapping out his empty magazine for a fresh one. As he did, one of the hollows emerged from behind what might have been a heavy trash container or crushed rock storage and rushed the merc's position as it opened fire.

The merc did not look up from his task, so confident was he that his battle buddy would anticipate his needs. The man's trust in Strega was well-placed despite the fact that they had only been training as a pair for a few weeks. Before the enemy had more than a handful of poorly aimed shots off, the merc stood over Osric and blasted the creature off of its feet.

Jada and Poe sprinted wide and to the right of the squad, drawing fire as several of the hollows broke off their attack and raced in pursuit of the dashing mercs.

Poe stayed a few paces behind his battle buddy, working to keep the creatures from flanking the pair by firing sporadically into the shadows whenever he caught a glimpse of limb, gun, or horrible jaws.

Jada pressed ahead into the fray, where their numbers seemed thickest, firing her rifle in tightly controlled bursts and moving from target to target with methodical detachment. She did not allow herself space or time to think of her enemies or the fighting beyond terms of target acquisition and bullet placement. She lost count of how many hollows she had gunned down.

There was no telling definitively which of the creatures she sent sprawling would actually stay down. Some of them wore armor that marked them as former battle troopers, though she began to notice that such creatures were in the minority. Most of the hollows were dressed in the tattered remnants of staff jumpsuits, indicating that they were labor crew, though whether each individual had been a driller, hauler, roustabout, or engineer was beyond her awareness or concern.

The sick green light of the beacon flare hung in the sky, and it suddenly reminded Jada of Deepspire, only where once there had been pools of shallow and fetid water, there were open dig pits and skeletal scaffolding. She had survived that, and she was determined to survive this; where others had gone into Vorhold and died, she yet remained. The thought of her continued survival was both a source of strength and anger for her, as it seemed like no matter what hell she walked through, it was her friends and loved ones who died, never her. Always, she remained a wretched thing that the universe just couldn't seem to kill. She was hard meat, as Vol used to say. The merc

raised her rifle to her shoulder once more, determined to show these hideous things, and herself, that she was indeed more than they could handle.

The squad pushed deeper into the excavation site, their enhanced bodies and powerful armor allowing them to move with great speed amidst the fury of combat.

Jada had served alongside the godlike warriors of the Folken in years past, but they were heavy infantry, designed to be the equivalent of human battle tanks. The Dire Swords, with their blitzkrieg-style of warfare, had tailored their armor and their bodies for the specific task of lightning infantry assault. The six killers ran across the excavation site with a deadly grace, all while engaging enemies from every direction.

Jada sprinted across the smooth surface of what she now understood to be a former building and leapt across the gap between it and the next, her body sailing over the flowstone alley where at least one of the creatures roared and fired upwards at her. As she stuck the landing, Jada tucked and rolled, having noticed a hollow charging her from ahead. She managed to evade the hail of bullets that spewed out of the beast's gun appendages.

Poe opened fire as he leapt across the gap, and several of his shots punched into the creature's chest, knocking it off balance and causing it to stumble.

Jada rose to a kneeling position and raised her rifle to her shoulder to fire while she continued to move into a standing position. She leveled her sights at the creature and squeezed off a single round that went into the screaming abomination's open mouth and exploded out of the back of its skull.

"Left flank!" bellowed Strega from the alley below while she turned her rifle to face the next threat as a hollow scuttled low across the ground, having just emerged from a dig pit covered in shadow and catching the merc by surprise. The beast had all of its appendages at the ready and they began to spit hard rounds at Strega before she could get her own shot off. Most of the rounds were turned away by her armor, though several bit through the joints and into her flesh.

As Strega and the creature exchanged salvos of fire, the Dire Sword was driven into cover by the sheer intensity of the enemy's advance.

Osric emerged from the other side of the alley and opened up, pushing the hollow towards Strega as it twisted its limbs to return fire. The wounded merc swept her rifle around the corner and added her weapon to the crossfire. In seconds, the shredded corpse of the creature collapsed in a heap.

Ranec rushed past Strega as he fired from the hip, his Gedra rifle

hurling hollow-point rounds through the re-animated flesh of a creature that appeared to have been one of the deck safety officers. A bright orange reflector vest still clung in tatters to the creature's chest.

"Holding!" shouted Ranec as he sent suppressing fire against the dark shapes moving in the gloom both ahead and to his left.

"Moving!" answered Berg, running past Ranec and up a metal gangplank that appeared to lead to a series of flowstone rooftops, one of which had been capped with a security bunker.

Jada saw Berg emerge from the streets below and once again marveled at the sheer tonnage of dirt and stone that must have been removed from this site in order to unearth the flowstone urban area and the master ring itself. Much of the outer limits of the urban zone had been left only half excavated, though as the warriors pushed deeper into the ancient site, they could see that the terrain was more and more urban.

When they had first started conducting missions on Ellisian worlds, the bizarre rock formations had seemed strange, but over time, that strangeness had evolved into something with obvious intention, but still alien in concept. Now that the mercs were positive that these were crafted urban structures, Jada found she could intuit her way through the area, and could recognize the difference between streets, pedestrian walkways, and alleys. It was a strange sensation to realize that she had begun to intuit an alien urban environment, yet it felt right, as if any sentient being that thought to build a city would inevitably achieve a similar metropolitan layout.

She saw the security bunker that Berg was rushing towards and altered her course by cutting sharply to the left. A set of scaffolds occupied the side of the buildings ahead of Berg, and from her vantage point, she could see one of the creatures climbing up on an intercept course with her fellow merc.

She built up speed by sprinting across the roof of the current building and cast herself powerfully into the air. She landed on the metal awning of a supply container which allowed her to slow her momentum and slide across the smooth metal as she fired several haphazardly aimed shots at the creature before dropping the last few meters to the street below. Her attack distracted the creature, foiling its ambush. It held onto the scaffold with one hand, snarling at her as two of its four gun appendages turned in her direction and fired.

Jada was already moving, passing through one of the now familiar cold spots that were so common in these forgotten landscapes, marveling that even that oddity had become normalized in the eternal grind of conflict. Projectiles chewed up the stone street as she sped across the open ground towards the base of the building. As she ran, she heard Poe's rifle go off, and by the time she reached

the base of the scaffold and looked up, the broken body of the creature was falling limply into the street below.

"Overwatch, I have a security bunker that has been completely stripped, easily forty-plus small arms slots on the rack are gone, all magazines," observed Berg over the company channel as Ranec ran up the gangplank to join his battle buddy while Poe made the jump and crossed the street to join Jada. "Looks like they cannibalized most of the restraining joints, too."

"Copy that, Raid Alpha," crackled the voice of Marcus in everyone's comm-beads. "Recon showing half a dozen or more posted in the site. Working theory is that this particular hollow horde has had more time to transform, so their modifications are more complex and effective."

"I'm not seeing any ammo belts on these guys," added Poe over the squad channel. "They probably just have the one magazine in each appendage and then they're out."

"Hence the teeth and claws," Strega replied, nodding as she shuffled up to the scaffold with Osric pulling security behind her.

"Push through it, mercs," growled Womack over the company channel. "We've got them stirred up now. Proceed to the master ring, frags authorized once all elements converge."

Jada looked at the three mercs standing with her and could see that it wasn't just Strega who had been hit. In the chaotic, running firefight, both Osric and Poe looked to have taken a few glancing hits and Jada herself was still nursing minor wounds in her thigh and shoulder. Likely, Berg and Ranec were suffering similar injuries. They were lucky that the creatures were outfitted with small arms weapons and nothing tremendously high caliber. The price they'd paid had brought them well into the enemy's territory, and soon they would reach the beacon and past that, the ring awaited.

Jada could see parts of the base of the ring looming on the horizon, illuminated by the sickly green light of the multitude of flares fired by the various assault squads.

The sound of combat was all around them as Dire Sword mercs fought running battles against the hollows, but in that moment, Jada felt at peace.

Battling against terrible foes on a distant scrap of rock in the light of a dying sun, did have something of a spark to it. Perhaps this was not the tale of heroes and villains that she had grown up on, but here she was, standing alongside what could be considered knights and making war with abominations as terrible as any storybook monster. They served no king, had no country, the glory was not as important as the gold, and even the money was only a pretense. After all that she had seen and done, like every Dire Sword, there was no life but this

one, no calling in life but the drop siren.

Jada watched as the green light of the flare illuminated the skulls on the helmets of the assembled warriors and knew that they saw the same light upon hers. They stood like that for a moment, each watching the other as battle raged around them, then Ranec and Berg opened up on a new clutch of enemies that approached. The four mercs in the street moved as one, surging forward on the ground as the other two mercs kept pace with them from the rooftops.

After the fury of the initial assault, it seemed that resistance had lessened now that the Dire Swords had broken through the outer perimeters and into the city proper. Their drop coordinates had spread elements evenly throughout the city, just on the outside of the excavation site so that they could push in without immediately having enemies at their backs.

Jada moved through the winding streets with an increased sense of unease. If the abominations had still been hurling themselves at her, she'd have felt better, but the enemy resistance had thinned to the point that Jada finally stopped in her tracks.

"Hold up," she said as she raised her clenched fist, halting the other five mercs. "Do you hear that?"

"I got nothing up here," answered Ranec from the low rooftop adjacent.

"That's what I mean, I don't hear anything," said Jada, straining to ensure that she wasn't just hallucinating. "Two minutes ago, we were in a citywide firefight, now all I hear is the wind and distant thunder."

"Raid Alpha, be advised, five Helion battle barges airborne and inbound," warned Marcus over the company channel. "A frigate slipped past our picket line from the other side of the planet and launched away craft before Sword Base could engage."

"We don't have the armor or air support to take on a dynamic response force," announced Womack. "Get the Tasca skiffs moving. First raid elements will reach master ring in minutes, toggle in on my beacon. Once the Objective is sighted, we paint the target and Tasca extracts while we hold position."

Moments later, a fresh flare sailed upwards from near the base of the master ring and Jada's HUD fixed on the position, prioritizing it over Berg's now flickering and dying flare several blocks to her left.

"So, I guess nobody is going to talk about how this place just went silent as the grave?" asked Poe over their private channel as he and Jada ran across a series of gangplanks that carried them over several dig pits.

"The closer we get to that ring without a fight, the worse I think it will be when we get there," responded Jada, swapping out her half-

empty magazine with a full one in anticipation of the heavy conflict to come.

"The Objective is calling its horde home," said Ranec over the squad channel. "Probably going to be a boss fight like back on Gedra Prime where they huddle up and battle as a mob, trying to protect the leader."

"If it turns out to be more than a tomb lord, which is dangerous enough, I hope those Tasca goons are up to the task," said Osric, who had served as ops security aboard Sword Base prior to being given the opportunity to advance to being a full-fledged Dire Sword. "Defending a hard point in this environment will be tough enough as it is without them running late."

As the mercs ran, more flares went up from the base of the ring and the shooting started in earnest. They could hear the strange report of the modified Gedra rifles mixed with a cacophony of small arms fire that they assumed came from the hollows.

Berg and Ranec leapt across one building, and as they landed upon the flowstone adjacent, they were able to see what was transpiring at the master ring.

"Overwatch, the master ring is unoccupied at the center, the Objective is not present," growled Womack over the company channel.

"Sat photos were taken over time, indicating the figure is stationary," replied Marcus in everyone's comm-bead, "Confirm observation."

"Overwatch, I'm telling you that dais is empty, but I have what appears to be a temple construct just beneath the ring, hollows are concentrating their defense of the substructure instead of the ring," snapped Womack. "Gregor and Qais, I want your squads to clear the steps and take the ring. Baylock and Indra, get a loose perimeter around the base of the structure. I'm taking the temple; Berg, you're second wave on me."

"We are circling the perimeter, taking no ground fire at present," said Najib over the company channel. "If the Objective is down there, tag the thing and we will drag it out one way or the other."

"Yep, it's a boss fight," snarled Ranec as he and Berg took a running leap off of the building and landed in the street alongside the rest of the mercs.

Strega's scanner lit up and the mercs quickened their pace, eager to engage, as if the whirlwind of a firefight was more comfortable than the eerie silence of moments before.

Jada emerged over a low ridge of flowstone and saw for the first time the sheer scale of the master ring. There were five fresh flares hanging high in the area, illuminating the scene before her, as if all of

the muzzle flares weren't enough.

Two squads of mercs were fighting their way up the terraced steps that had been cut or otherwise shaped out of the raw face of a massive flowstone wall. Resistance appeared to be light, as only a handful of the creatures stood against them. The real firefight was taking place at the base of the ring, where two squads of Dire Swords were exchanging withering hails of fire with a swarm of hollows that poured in from the surrounding area, as if converging on the temple in order to defend it.

Jada and the others sprinted across the open ground that lay between the urban landscape and the temple and began to engage. The mercs circled wide of the firefight and then cut in sharply, putting themselves somewhat parallel to the other mercs defending the base of the structure. When Jada cut loose with her rifle, spitting forth a mixture of tracer rounds and armor-piercing bullets, her angle of attack allowed her to tear into the enemy with a strong crossfire while avoiding having her comrades downrange.

In the additional seconds it took for the squad to get into position, the hurricane of small arms fire had dropped one of the mercs defending the temple and the rest of them were sporting a wide variety of minor injuries.

Jada advanced as she fired, her sprint having slowed to a steady march as she carefully selected targets and put round after round into them. Now that all of the Dire Sword elements were in place, the frag ban was lifted and the squads who were positioned on the terraced high ground of the ring started firing grenade rounds into the thick knots of advancing hollows.

Each of the mercs had been kitted out with a break action single shot grenade pistol that fired explosive projectiles. They were 'slag frags' that were metal cylinders with cores that became super-heated when fired. Once detonated, the cylinders were transformed into molten metal shrapnel, capable of burning flesh and slagging armor, hence the name.

Jada and her group advanced under the cover of the hail of grenades coming from the squads above. The rain of explosives combined with the crossfire maneuver had inflicted grievous casualties upon the enemy. However, the hollows were not deterred and continued to hurl themselves at the mercs without regard for their continued survival. A fresh wave of hostiles emerged from the urban sprawl and sprinted towards the merc defenders, spitting pistol rounds in deadly clouds as they came.

Jada had seen this sort of tactic before on many battlefields, the last desperate surge before defeat, the most reckless and deadly moment of any conflict. Without an abundance of legitimate cover, it

was a shooting war out of ancient history, with two forces hurling salvos at each other across open ground. Such was the tactical reality of the conflict, even if it was far less than ideal. Thankfully, the presence of the Gedra rifles and the slag frags gave the mercs a distinct edge.

As the defenders held the firing line, Jada, firing from the hip, continued towards the temple entrance, a simple archway leading into darkness and the unknown.

"On your right!" shouted Strega suddenly. Jada turned and saw that a hollow, its ammunition expended, was rushing at her with its wicked claws.

The merc dove to the side and skidded on her back across the rugged ground as the hideous creature swiped at the air where she'd been only a second before. The creature was off balance, and Jada was able to put several rounds into it before a second creature leapt upon her. Had she been the unenhanced marine of her past, the abomination would have been able to sink its claws into her, but the meta-human mercenary she was now, slammed the side of her rifle into the creature's chin, holding it at bay for a precious second so that she could grab her pistol and put several magnum rounds through its throat and out the back of its skull.

Jada rolled and cast the beast off of her as she rose to her feet, pistol at the ready. Ahead of her, Berg, Ranec, and Poe, were plunging into the temple entrance. The merc cast her glance across the battlefield and saw the rest of the defenders holding their position, their superior firepower having all but wiped out the hollow counter-attack.

Then Jada saw Strega pounding bullets into the body of a hollow. As it fell away, the merc could see that it had been on top of Osric. The creature had managed to force its bladed fingers into the joints of Osric's mag-armor, prying open his suit like a tin of food rations. The merc had been torn to pieces in seconds. Jada watched with a sense of detached horror as Strega just stepped over Osric's ravaged body and moved on, slapping a fresh magazine into her rifle.

As Jada followed Strega into the darkness, the two mercs swept their gun-mounted lights through the gloom. The shattered bodies of multiple hollows filled the corridor, as if they'd charged Womack's squad en masse and been mowed down. When they came across the mangled corpse of Ven, a Dire Sword veteran of many years, it was clear the advance had not been without cost.

Jada could see that though the exterior of the temple was covered in flowstone, this interior was made of the same polished alien material as the necropolis buildings on the tomb worlds. The sounds of fighting within were near deafening, and in the tight confines of the

temple interior, Jada was thankful for the dampeners in her helmet.

Soon, the corridor opened up to reveal a similar, if smaller, layout of the tomb world central chamber that Jada recalled from her first encounter with the Gedra.

Among the dozen or so slabs, upon which Jada recalled the alpha cyborg had been transforming dead penal legionnaires into hollows, the floor of the chamber was littered with more bodies of hollows.

An alpha cyborg was standing atop of a low dais being subjected to a punishing amount of firepower as seven Dire Swords unleashed their weapons on it.

Strega leapt into the fray and began shooting, while Jada hesitated for a moment. She saw Taymar lying prone at the base of the dais, huge pieces of her left side simply gone, the wound lines fused, indicating that she'd been hit with one of the deadly energy orbs that the cyborgs defended themselves with.

Jada raised her rifle to her shoulder and took careful aim, knowing that in moments, the cyborg's energy shield would fail or at least flicker, and the merc was determined to end this fight. Her patience was rewarded when the shield suddenly collapsed with a tremendous shockwave.

Jada squeezed the trigger and a single armor-piercing round streaked from her rifle, tearing through the eye socket of the cyborg, knocking its head back. It had barely begun to collapse when it was thrown off the dais by the combined bursts of fire from several of the other mercs.

When the cyborg's body exploded, as expected, most of the mercs had been able to find cover.

As Jada watched the cyborg die from a distance, she was taken aback at how routine such incredible events had become in her life. Years ago, when they had first encountered the Gedra, the salvage marines had died in droves trying to bring down the giant mechanical beast.

Now that years of war had passed and more intelligence gathered, they knew how to kill these things with brutal efficiency. While it was almost impossible to defeat them without destroying them, the command module and its powers had yet to be recovered or investigated, but at least not nearly as many people had to die in combat against them.

Then, as quickly as it had arrived, the sensation of accomplishment was dashed when Jada realized, as did the other mercs, that the Objective's whereabouts was as yet unknown.

"Recover Taymar and let's get topside," growled Womack as he returned his now empty assault rifle to its mooring pegs on his back. "The Objective isn't above and it isn't below. We're going to have to

call this one a wash."

For a moment, nobody moved, shocked as they were at their leader's admission of failure. They were the Dire Swords, they did not fail, and yet, here they were, on a hostile alien world, with Helion bearing down on them, and no sign of the Objective. Already, more Dire Swords had died on this single operation than many others combined and they had nothing to show for it.

When they emerged from the temple, it was to the sound of wind and thunder, but no violence. The merc defenders held their line and it appeared that the hollows had spent their strength at last. As soon as they were out of the temple, their comm-beads flooded their ears with radio chatter and the mercs realized that their signal had been temporarily ruined while inside.

"Overwatch, we can see the Helion barges, maybe three minutes out, be advised," said Najib over the company channel, "This is going to be tight, you may have to shoot your way out."

"Dropships are returning for extraction, on site in two minutes," responded Marcus. "Raid Alpha, you aren't going to believe this, but we are looking at live feed sat images and the Objective is right there."

"The temple was just a hollow horde conversion chamber, no sign of the Objective," argued Womack.

"Negative on temple, Raid Alpha, the Objective is standing in the center of the master ring base, right there on the dais," Marcus insisted, his voice tinged with something like disbelief. As one, the mercs all looked at the ring and the dais at the center of the base.

"Overwatch, your instruments are lying to you, I'm looking right at the dais and there's nothing there. Raid Alpha, converge on the master ring, we're done here," ordered Womack as he began to ascend the terraced steps leading to the base of the master ring. "Overwatch, this mission is humped, no sign of the Objective, we exfil now before we lose anymore that we have. I will inform House Indron of our failure in person."

"Copy that, Tasca pulling out," responded Najib, and Jada could see the slaver skiff moving over the flowstone buildings start banking hard so that it could move away before the Helion barges arrived.

"I'll be glad, at least, to get away from the cold spots," said Poe as he joined Jada, "I haven't been able to get used to that and this place is full of them."

Jada stared at Poe, then turned back and looked at the dais, swept away by a sudden idea.

"*The ghosts*," she breathed.

She began rushing up the terrace, and as she continued upwards, she became more convinced of her theory. "*Womack, the Objective is*

here!"

The Helion battle barges were coming close, and the growl of their engines started to fill the air, each of the mercs knowing that in moments they would be disgorging fresh platoons of battle troopers, likely with tank support.

"*Jada, report! What do you see?"* barked Womack as he saw Jada and Poe pull ahead of the others who were setting up a defensive perimeter on the terrace, preparing to repel the Helion advance until the dropships could extract them. "I'm looking right at the dais and there's nothing there!"

"It's cold," said Jada as she stood in the exact center of the dais.

"Raid Alpha, I am still seeing the Objective, right where you are standing, the image is heavily artifacted because of the planetary interference, but that doesn't account for this," insisted Marcus. "Jada, you're right on top of it!"

"Najib, bring your skiff around!" said Womack, "Whatever she's got, we're only going to have one shot at this before Helion is all over us."

"Just like the rest of the signals, its cold but there's nothing here," observed Poe as he started looking around.

"Tasca inbound, twenty seconds," said Najib over the comm-bead. "Ellis, get on the net. Jean, ignite the cage. I hope you have something for us, Jada, we're coming in hot."

"Look at your feet," said Poe as he pointed, and as Jada took a step back out of the cold spot, she saw that at the center of the dais was a symbol, inlaid into the stone with the polished alien material of the temple. It made Jada's brain itch just looking at it, though what it signified she could only guess.

And then she had it.

"This isn't a platform at all!" she exclaimed, stepping back off the dais and pointed to the underside of it. The dais was actually comprised of a slab of flowstone, reinforced with the heavy alien material, set atop a base of equal dimensions, "This is a *coffin!*"

The two mercs stepped off the dais as Womack joined them. After a moment of silence, interrupted by the scream of the slaver skiff's engines and the roar of the Helion barges, the three of them began to push against the slab. It took everything they had, but after a few moments, the slab began to move, and there was a rush of cold fetid air as they broke the seal of the coffin.

An inhuman scream filled their ears, whiting out the chatter in their comm-beads and driving the three mercs back a step. A hand, far too large to be human, emerged from within the coffin, effortlessly shoving the lid back and off.

A ragged figure rose from inside. Even as tall as the mercs were

with their enhanced bodies and mag-armor, it still towered over them and it was a walking nightmare to look upon.

Jada had no idea what it actually looked like; her mind painted it as the Stalker in the Dark. The trauma of witnessing the unleashing of this horror of horrors threatened to break her mind. There was a power rolling from this terrible thing they had just awakened, palpable and as cold as the blackest hole in the void.

The stench of burning flesh filled her nostrils and Jada experienced George Tuck dying once more. She had not seen what happened to him, but she'd heard it, she'd smelled it, and in the presence of this alien wraith that had risen from its coffin, Jada was back in Vorhold.

"*Contact! Contact!*" screamed a voice, perhaps Ranec, over the comm-bead, cutting through the deafening rush of blood in her ears and Jada began to make out the crackle of small arms fire.

"*Objective sighted!*" bellowed Najib, "*Engaging!*"

"Just kill it, please, just kill it," mumbled Womack over the company channel, his voice uncharacteristically small and weak. "Please, make it die."

Jada screamed inside her helmet and squeezed the grip of her pistol, the feel of the weapon in her hand as she slid it from its holster the only thing keeping her sane.

The Stalker loomed before her. Through the swirl of rags that clung to its body, she caught glimpses of metal, a gleaming mechanical skeleton beneath the flowing ragged cloth and bleached desiccated flesh. She was near to vomiting and she could feel blood seeping out of her nose as she struggled to raise her pistol.

Beside her, Poe lay prone, bright red pouring from his nose and ears. On the other side of her, Womack was curled into fetal position, still begging her, or anyone, to slay the specter. Behind her, she could hear a firefight erupting in the wash of the dropship engines that had no doubt come for the extraction. Najib was yelling something in the comm-bead, but she couldn't make it out.

She knew that behind this figment of her imagination wearing the face of the Stalker in the Dark, was something more terrible than anything she could even consciously perceive. Every instinct was screaming at her to end this hellish abomination.

"It has to die," said Jada, realizing that she'd been repeating that phrase out loud. The pistol was in her shaking hand and she raised it level with the putrid thing that filled the horizon of her consciousness. "*It has to die.*"

As Jada squeezed the trigger, her body was struck violently and pinned to the ground by a metal net. She recognized it as a projectile from the Tasca net launchers. Watching the barbed points drilling

themselves into the flowstone snapped her back to reality.

The thing that had been in the coffin wasn't making a sound, or if it was, the cacophony of gunfire and roaring engines as dropships, barges, and the slaver skiff converged on the ring all at once drowned it out. She could only see parts of the nightmare as it writhed, engulfed in multiple net projectiles. Ellis must have pre-loaded six or seven of the nets, and as she watched, several of what looked like electro-darts slammed into the creature.

For a tense moment, it seemed the thing would surely burst free before the retro-fitted cage slammed down upon it. The cage itself was attached to a cable, and as the skiff continued on its flight path, the cable grew taut and the cage was dragged into the air.

There was little more to see pinned to the ground, and as the cage was lifted, her line of sight fell upon Poe's prone form. He lay face down, but his helmet's faceplate hadn't broken and Jada could see the man within. His eyes were open and blood seeped from his nose and ears. Whether he was alive or not, Jada couldn't tell. The sight of her battle buddy gave her a renewed strength and she pushed up against the net pinning her to the ground.

The mag-armor ground against the net, but soon her enhanced strength won out against the barbs, and she pulled herself free of the net. It was when she tried to stand up that Jada realized, too late, just how damaging being in the presence of the Objective had been and her legs gave out, sending the merc collapsing in a heap before passing out entirely.

7. ONE FOR THE STALKER

Above her, in a low orbit, lurked the ship Far Rider, a sleek cargo hauler belonging to the shipping magnate Praxis Mundi. The cost of passage had been a small fortune, compounded by the private use of one of the Rider's exploration craft, though Jada cared little for such details. The Dire Sword's accounts were bursting with wealth, for such was the bounty of continued success within the elite ranks of the Merchants Militant.

The casual detachment with which Jada now spent vast sums of money was something of a norm among the Merchants Militant who did not have families or causes to support, more common even among the grim ranks of the Dire Swords. It was part of the cosmic tragedy, in Jada's thinking, that of all the soldiers of fortune in the universe, it was those with the highest pay rate that seemed to care the least about money.

Womack and Jada had recovered from the inexplicable trauma they had endured upon witnessing the Objective. Her battle buddy, Poe, had suffered a brain aneurism and died on those steps. Poe had died without attachment, just like Mors, with no family or heirs to speak of beyond his commitment to his comrades, and so his wealth was folded into the operational accounts of Sword Base.

In the de-briefing, they had learned that the Objective was a cyborg, but one vastly different than the alpha cyborgs. It had brain waves, albeit somewhat alien ones, and once the shock of its capture had subdued it, the stasis cage it had been placed in by the Tasca operatives kept it so.

Jada knew little and cared less about the technical specifics of the cage, or even the Objective itself, so long as it was being taken away. According to the trade agreement between House Indron and Augur Corporation, the Objective was being covertly transported to an undisclosed facility in Augur space by the Tasca operatives. They were taking the long way around, across the frontier, as many slave ships did in order to avoid any adverse contact with corporate elements.

For her, and the rest of the Dire Swords, the mission was over. Whatever outcome resulted from their capture of the Objective was of no concern to them.

They arrive. They fight. They leave.

The mercenaries were disconnected from the tapestry of corporate intrigue, having little awareness or interest in the big picture or the grand scheme. That was for others, for them, there was only the next mission, onwards until the last.

She and Womack both been shaken by their experience. Womack

had stepped down as captain, allowing Berg to take his place while he focused on repairing his own damaged psyche and returning to the fundamentals of basic soldiering.

Jada had the same arrangement as Poe did when it came to the eventuality of her death, though she had one thing left to do before her time in this life came to an end, the reason that had brought her across the void to this forgotten planet and the corpse of its capital city. The moment she'd placed Poe's skull-faced helmet upon the altar shelves, she'd known what she had to do.

Jada watched in silence as a strong wind swept across the bitter surface of a place that had once been known as Vorhold.

The city was all but a skeleton now, after everything of value had been stripped away from it, including the people. It was here that she had seen the true face of horror, where she had known her fiercest combat and the site of her greatest loss.

Deepspire had left its mark on all the marines who had gone down into that pit, and though many of them returned, every single one of them left a piece of themselves down there.

It wasn't so much that the furious chaos of combat had been any different for the marines who fought that long and bitter campaign. They had faced tough enemies before that, and after Vorhold, they had met the Gedra. No, it was something else, thought Jada as she exited the landing craft and stepped into the heavy gale, more that Vorhold had served as a model of what corporate tyranny could look like if left unchecked by the people who lived under its rule.

Jada had stood on the picket line alongside the other marines during the now famous, or infamous, depending on one's perspective, Reaper Strike. She had joined the labor movement because she did care about Grotto Corporation, despite its many faults.

After her time in necrospace, she had come to believe that there needed to be order of some kind in the galaxy and commerce was a natural human activity and a universal rallying point for civilization. The Grotto regime was a hard one, but there was a kind of dignity possible for those who had the will and the yellow-eyed daughter of Hama Sek had an awareness of that more nuanced than most.

Life and prospects for the average citizens of Grotto had been incrementally improved after the Anointed Actuaries had bargained with the Reapers and other labor movements. There was compromise, and a mutual understanding that they were all in it together, regardless of where on the corporate ladder any individual happened to perch. The arrangement was functional, an implicit understanding of give and take between the powers and the people.

Vorhold had been a system out of balance. The city itself was a model for that failed corporation, from the glittering towers of the

elites to the horrific subterranean dwellings of its lowest human scum. The center could not hold, because the core of Vorhold was rotten, and it was in that fetid dark place that the Stalker emerged.

She and the other marines had gone into that hole and battled the monsters the sins of tyranny and neglect made manifest, and yet, they were not there to rescue the people, only to eliminate obstacles for the efficient scrapping of an entire civilization. A once great predator had fallen, and the scavengers had come to feast. It was nothing more, and nothing less. The elites of Vorhold had irresponsibly gambled with the future of the corporation, and the people ultimately paid the price.

Jada walked down the exit ramp of the small craft as she marveled at how thorough the liquidation of this civilization had been. She had done her part, with both rifle and blowtorch, to see this place torn apart and had been well paid for her trouble. Her boots made the gravel crunch as she consulted her nav-unit, having done her best to use the shoddy long-range scanners to create a rough map of the forgotten city.

Much like the other wasteland worlds that comprised necrospace, this planet proved difficult for long-range scanners because of all the environmental devastation, and in this case, industrial pollution.

When Grotto had been liquidating Vorhold, very little care was taken to manage the waste materials throughout the planet. Factories were stripped and toxic runoff was allowed to seep into the raw earth. Entire sections of Downspire were simply buried under rubble, only to have the various pollutants fester in the dark and worm their way into the environment at large.

She had been a scavenger when last she had set foot on this planet. Jada Sek had since transformed herself into a predator and she stalked the ruins with a new perspective.

Jada picked her way through the remnants of the city, which were little more than concrete shells, everything else had been stripped away. In her hands, Jada carried one of the large assault rifles that the Dire Swords used before they were supplied with the modified Gedra weapons. Given her meta-human stature, she towered over unenhanced human beings, and with the weapon and billowing cloak, she knew she cut an impressive figure. The red hazard goggles and menacing armored re-breather certainly gave her a monstrous appearance.

She was unarmored, not having bothered to request the use of mag-armor for this personal journey. Womack had understood that this was something she needed to do. Neither he nor Marcus, who had given her the rifle, were going to allow her to wander the galaxy unarmed considering how much of an investment the mercenary company had made in her physique. Not while she was still in

possession of a functioning body.

She saw on her nav-unit that she was close and Jada could tell that the ground was sloping downwards. When the craft was landing, the pilot had seen signs of several groups of people in the area, likely small bands of hardened survivors.

There was nothing of value left on Vorhold. Those few people who had elected to stay planetside had been placed on the Red List, so they were completely on their own. Slavers would never come here. Jada checked her rad levels and saw that there was certainly enough in the area that prolonged exposure would be damaging. The people who managed to survive here would be spoiled in the eyes of a slaver, as they would be too feral to make for reliable chattel and likely too medically hazardous to be worth scooping up in the first place.

Little to nothing could grow here, so anyone who remained would have to build greenhouses, fungus farms, scavenge the limited bits of stored goods, or resort to cannibalism. Likely, everyone engaged in some mix of everything, mused Jada as she climbed the stairs of a severely leaning concrete building which overlooked her destination.

She was obviously hard meat and even here, in this blasted place, nobody seemed desperate or crazy enough to raise their hand against her. In fact, thought Jada as she saw a few humanoid shadows fleeing in the other direction through the labyrinth of ruined buildings, her size and appearance just might remind her observers enough of the Stalkers that they didn't even want to be in the same area. The thought of the Stalkers shifted Jada's attentions back to her destination, and she looked out across the ruined ground.

The section of Deepspire where she and the others had faced the Stalkers in the Dark was, by her recollection, miles below the gigantic debris pit that lay not far from her current position. She could see where the subterranean blasts had collapsed this entire section of city inwards, filling the hollow pits of the Stalkers with incalculable tonnage. She recalled watching it from a similar angle, high in a still as yet unscrapped medical facility.

Jada turned to look behind her, overwhelmed by the memory, and could almost see the ravaged body of Ben Takeda lying in a hospital bed before her. A cascade of sensations and memories buffeted her psyche, and she was vividly assaulted by her own mind as she struggled to engage her breathing techniques.

When a single gunshot rang out and a bullet tore a piece of concrete out of the wall next to her, Jada hurled herself to the ground. For a moment, she wondered if her hallucinations had become that powerful considering that she was retracing some of the worst moments of her life and then baleful howls went up all around her.

She may have been awash in memories of the past, but her keen

hearing took note of the unmistakable sounds of several hostiles rushing across the broken ground towards her. She scampered across the crumbling concrete as two more shots nearly struck her, this time realizing that they were coming from the half-demolished building on her left. Jada scolded herself for the oversight, so focused was she on her destination and coping with her troubled mind that she'd neglected the basics of terrain awareness.

From the sound of the report, the shooter was using a pistol, which accounted for how the enemy had managed to miss three times in a row. At this distance, even a crack shot with a pistol was likely to miss at least once.

The merc reached a massive hole in the floor and poured herself through it, taking a firm grip on the edge, and going in headfirst so that she could swing her body around and land on her feet when she let go. Jada stuck the landing and unslung her assault rifle just in time to realize her mistake.

Whether the shooter was trying to hit her or not, he or she had successfully driven the merc back to the ground floor where she now stood surrounded by enemies. Their elongated bodies were slick with mucus, their weeping mouths filled with rows of barbed teeth.

Four of them writhed in the shadows of the broken room, each one long enough to wrap itself around her with ease. They were poised to strike, but just as they surged towards her, they were stopped short by a high-pitched keening sound that was all too familiar. The giant bone worms that had once served the Stalkers had managed to tunnel their way to the surface, where she presumed by the familiar keening sound they'd found new masters.

Jada bitterly accepted the cost of her hubris. She might be hard meat indeed, but what soft things could possibly have survived in this harsh place? In this wasteland, only the hard remained, the scavengers had long been devoured, and now it was predator against predator. She knew that the moment she moved, they would attack, for even with the mastery of the whistle, she could feel their hunger positively radiating from them. It would only be a matter of moments before whoever controlled the worms revealed themselves. Jada slowed her breathing and stood perfectly still. The most likely tactic at this point was to salvage her equipment and the choicest cuts of her meat before the worms annihilated her body.

Jada recalled vividly from the last time she'd fought these creatures that they were able to swiftly batter their way through the flak boards that the salvage marines had brought to use as mobile defenses. The creatures were incredibly strong, their undulating bodies essentially thick ropes of muscle with a digestive track, tipped with a hardened area at the front of the creature that allowed it to

smash and chew through just about anything. She had come to this planet to face her past and now here she was, surrounded by beasts all too real and all too eager to give her closure one way or the other.

As the sharp stench of the creatures reached her senses even through the re-breather's filter, the tangible truth of them brought a change over the merc.

The beasts might be as terrifyingly deadly as they once were, but Jada had become something far worse. The boarding knife was the only thing she'd kept from her days as a salvage marine, stolen from her kit just before she mustered out. There had been no convenient fitting for it while wearing her mag-armor, so Jada had not carried it into battle since that last fight on Gedra Prime. For this journey, she had strapped it to her forearm, in the traditional Reaper fashion. She could have raised her assault rifle and fired point blank into the wall of flesh that writhed before her, and yet it was the knife that suddenly filled her fist.

The merc was silent as she moved. Inside, her mind screamed in fear and anger, grief and horror as she sprang forward, letting the assault rifle fall back on its sling.

Before the nearest bone worm could react, Jada had wrapped her right arm tightly around its head, just behind the ridge of its hardened front end, holding it despite the creature's formidable strength. The merc was an enhanced meta-human, extremely well-trained and conditioned, capable of feats beyond any unenhanced human, yet it still tested her strength and agility to maintain her hold on the frenzied beast.

She plunged her boarding knife into the creature's sticky flesh, just behind the ridge and pulled the blade around in a circular motion, twisting the handle. The creature's head was nearly severed by her deep cut and the thrashing of its powerful body finished its own decapitation.

Another worm launched itself at Jada's upper body while another coiled around her legs. The merc was lost in a berserker's fury and slashed wildly at the two worms as they wrestled her to the ground. She managed to get her hand under the mandibles of the beast attempting to burrow its head through her belly and stabbed it from point to hilt three times before it finally stopped struggling.

The worm near her feet had wrapped itself around her left leg so tightly that she had already lost feeling in it. Barbed teeth sank into her right leg just as she was able to turn her attention to it. Jada hacked at the worm with the knife, cleaving great chunks out of its flesh, but it continued to burrow into the meat of her leg.

The simple, disposable body glove she'd donned underneath her cloak was ripped to shreds as the creature chewed and swallowed a

mouthful of her thigh muscle. Jada howled in pain and fury as she desperately fought against the urge to pass out from blood loss. Finally, she sunk the blade into the creature's head, just behind the hardened ridge as she'd done with its brood kin, but before she could make good on decapitating it, the fourth worm joined the fray.

The keening sounded again and the fourth worm whipped its body at Jada, slamming into her and knocking the woman across the rubble-strewn floor and into the far wall. The merc was dazed from the impact, but thankfully, the force of the blow had loosened the grip of the other worm upon her body, though her thigh was spurting blood from their deadly embrace.

While the worm who had bitten her was hurling itself this way and that, the boarding knife buried in its body and seeming to drive it mad with pain, the remaining worm moved in for the kill.

Jada was wounded, but she was a veteran of many conflicts, conditioned to fight against the most terrible of odds and her reflexes were superb. Before she realized what she was doing, the merc slung her rifle around and fired it from the hip, squeezing the trigger over and over as she peppered the worm with high-velocity rounds.

The worm came up short as it reacted to the multiple projectiles that tore through its glistening body. The creature attempted to flee through one of the many holes bashed in the walls of the building and Jada tracked it as she continued to fire.

Shots rang out to answer her own and the merc dove for cover, instinctively putting both the worm and a large chunk of fallen concrete between her and the new threat.

Instead of returning fire, Jada leaned out from the other side and put one more clean shot through the fleeing body of the worm, eliciting a gurgling noise that sounded to her ears like a death knell. The other worm that had her knife in it was still writhing around, though its movements had become sluggish. She dared a brief glimpse before ducking back into cover. She could see that it had absorbed at least one of the errant shots from her initial salvo.

Two voices began speaking, and though their words made no sense to her, they had a gravel-choked accent that was very similar to that of Vol and the other cast-off denizens of Downspire.

It had been a number of years since the liquidation of Vorhold, and Jada found it likely that the survivors had developed a dialect that was nearly all slang words and very little common corporate vocabulary.

Jada had a thick Grotto accent, indicative of her low hab block ancestry, but through her compulsory education and life off-world, she'd taken the edge off of it. These were clearly Downspire folk who had been far enough removed from corporate culture that they'd

become totally reliant on local slang. Samuel Hyst and Harold Marr had spent the most time mingling with the locals during the Vorhold campaign, and apparently even they only understood the Downspire speech about half the time.

However, it didn't take much for Jada to guess, from their tone and direction, that these two hostiles were debating whether or not to engage her. After all, she'd just wiped out their four attack worms and likely that represented a heavy blow to their confidence, much less the caloric bottom line that all survivors in such a hellish environment would be keeping an eye on.

They likely didn't know how badly she was injured, and Jada considered just giving them a blast on full auto to drive them away, but she had something to finish here and it would not do to have hunters at her back when she made her way into the debris pit. Resolved to see this fight to the end, Jada swiftly and silently swapped out her half-spent magazine for a full one and racked the slide to ready the first round.

The sound of her weapon chambering spurred her enemies into action. One fired on her position, no doubt to keep her head down while the other moved around to flank her. It was a good stratagem, one that she'd have attempted herself if on their side of the field. She was going to have to act quickly before the flanking hostile got into position.

The merc quickly reached into a pouch on her belt and produced a small first aid kit. First, she unceremoniously dumped a vial of clotting powder over her grievous wound, following it up with one of the combat cocktails that Marcus made sure each merc had in the field.

This particular batch was designed to give the user a boost of adrenaline while providing a localized anesthetic, the combination of which caused minor hallucinations, which is what kept that particular brand of combat drugs out of scope for unenhanced soldiers. The Dire Swords were well equipped to dealing with the incredibly unpleasant 'crash' that occurred once the drugs cleared the system, not to mention being old hands at coping with terrible hallucinations.

The drugs surged through Jada's system and she gasped as a newfound chemical strength flooded her limbs. She opened her eyes and sprang from her position, her legs pumping to give her tremendous speed despite her wounded leg, and she sprinted across the short distance between her chunk of cover and the large hole in the wall that the worm had fled through.

As she expected, one of the attackers was drawn out into the open by the sight of what he or she perceived as an easy target and the hostile opened fire, hoping to hit Jada as she fled. The merc had taken

a gamble, chancing that she would be able to turn the tables on the enemy before a clean shot brought her down. When she reached the hole, Jada leapt up and through it, her powerful body giving her enough airtime to turn over and face her enemy, as planned. Her assault rifle was at the ready and she got a brief glimpse of her enemy as they exchanged fire simultaneously.

The man was dressed like a ganger from Downspire, with brightly colored patchwork clothing and spiral tattoos on his face and neck. His chest was covered with the cheap riot plates typically worn by cor-sec officers of the former Vorhold enforcer corps. He was armed with a cor-sec small caliber pistol and from his neck hung the accursed whistles carried by the Stalkers that Jada recalled all too well.

Whoever he was, there was no doubt in Jada's mind that he was hard meat, for no common man would have been able to get his hands on one of those whistles, much less figure out how to command the worms. She'd been right all along: this was predator against predator.

Pistol rounds whipped through the air around her and one managed to tear across her ribs before Jada's own burst of fire caught her opponent in the chest and sent him hurtling backwards in a blossom of blood and shattered armor. Jada landed awkwardly on the ground just outside the building, her fall somewhat broken by the body of the worm, which had indeed expired moments after its escape.

Jada grunted and rolled onto all fours and brought her rifle up as she rose to a crouching position. The ganger, wounded and frenzied as he was, sprang out of the hole moments later wielding Jada's gory boarding knife. Jada let out a measured breath and punched a round through his forehead just as he emerged. His head snapped back but his momentum carried his corpse to the ground next to his killer. Hard men died hard, thought Jada as she wiped the boarding knife on the man's clothes and returned it to the sheath, but they still died.

The merc heard the sound of running feet just around the corner of the building, and she hugged the wall before risking a look down the broken avenue beyond.

A woman with the same ganger look about her was fleeing through the street, a pistol in her hand and what looked to be a hatchet strapped across her shoulders. It seemed that she had decided the bottom line wasn't worth fighting for after what had just happened to her partner and their worms.

Jada did not hesitate to raise her rifle to her shoulder and take aim. Battle had been joined and this was still a combatant, even if one in retreat. The merc squeezed the trigger once and watched through her scope as the round slammed into the ganger's back. By the

peculiar way the woman jerked before collapsing in a stiff heap, Jada was relatively certain that her bullet had struck the hostile's spine.

Despite her surge of chemical induced strength and energy, Jada could already feel the crash coming. Now that the fighting was done, everything felt as if it was getting numb, her senses dulling by the second, and she knew that she had to hurry. Her body was already knitting itself back together, but the wound on her leg was not only severe, it was being exposed to all manner of pollutants and toxins from the environment. Jada knew she was going to have to pay the steep costs for emergency medical attention once back aboard the Far Rider. They could stabilize her and manage the various infections and pollutants until she could return to Sword Base for a full recovery.

Jada popped in a fresh magazine and consulted her nav-unit before limping as swiftly as she could towards the debris pit.

It did not take her long to reach the coordinate and it had been an arbitrary one anyway. Once she stood on top of the heap of rubble around the pit, she could see down into it to the bottom, a few meters down the slope of rubble. The explosions had done their job well, as had the professional salvage crews, and the freelance scavengers who came later. Only those students of obscure military history would ever know about the men and women who fought and died here, on all sides. Progress had left this world behind.

Jada fingered the ring that hung from her neck, and walked down to the bottom of the pit. It was just sand and broken pieces of buildings, but now that she was deep enough to be out of the wind, it felt as far down as the bottom of the world. This was the black hole in her universe, the crushing singularity that filled her waking hours with angst and her sleep with nightmares.

Jada pulled her hood down from her head, ignoring the increasing fatigue in her battered body and then removed the re-breather.

The fetid air stung Jada's lungs, but it was a familiar miasma and strangely comforting. The merc knelt down in the dust and drew her boarding knife from its sheath. With her other hand, she removed the necklace from her throat and wrapped it around the handle of the knife.

Tears suddenly began to streak her face. She held the razor sharp blade before her for a moment, considering its sturdy construction and the dull gleam of the ring now affixed to the hilt. There were only two paths from this point, that much she knew, and for what seemed like an eternity, she remained still, the knife gripped firmly in her hands.

Then, her decision made, she pulled the pin loose that held her hair in a knot at the back of her head and let it fall in a tumbled mass around her shoulders.

The Reapers had never much cared about having regulation hair policies and marines could keep themselves groomed how they liked so long as it did not interfere with their helmets or their duties. The Dire Swords were much the same.

George had loved her long, silky hair.

She raised the knife to her head and pressed it against her skin.

Jada's hair fell almost to her waist and the weight of it helped with the cutting. Blood ran down Jada's face as the blade bit into her scalp in a few places despite how carefully she rasped the edge over her head.

Before long, the ground before her was covered with a mound of long, dark hair splattered with drops of blood. When she was finished, Jada held the knife up once more, taking in the sight of the ring.

"Enough, now," whispered Jada, kissing the ring. Then she raised the knife in both hands and drove the point of the boarding knife through the dark locks and into the ground.

Then the merc stood up and unslung her rifle just in case there were hostiles lurking out there thinking they could make easy prey out of a wounded interloper. The fight would certainly have attracted the attention of any scavengers or hunters in the area, though the carnage would likely repel more than it attracted. True predators rarely attacked prey that might cost them a pound of flesh in the taking of them.

She climbed up the slope and out of the pit so she could consult her nav-unit then began limping towards the landing craft.

She did not look back.

8. DIRE SWORD

Jada reached the landing craft without further incident and knew that the crew inside were watching her approach through the security feeds. They had been given explicit instructions not to leave the ship and had no doubt taken notice of the firefight earlier.

Jada approached the hatch and punched in her access code as she slung her rifle and lowered her hood so that the feed could get a good look at her face. The pilot checked her code and upon seeing that it matched, he lowered the boarding plank. The merc entered the airlock, and once the hatch closed behind her, she removed her cloak and stripped off the disposable body glove. Once those were stuffed into the small incinerator unit, she stepped under the de-con showerhead and let the scalding hot solution of water and neutralizing chemicals cleanse her of the last remnants of Vorhold.

The water shut off and gusts of air dried her skin in seconds. The shower had stripped off a thin layer of skin, giving her elegant body a dull gleam. She padded over to a locker next to the shower and pulled a simple one-piece flight suit from the rack. While the Praxis Mundi exploration craft had been incredibly expensive to lease, it offered the kind of amenities that made this journey possible.

The merc entered the craft's main deck minutes later and upon confirming that she was back aboard, the crew set about preparing for takeoff. She walked through the small craft until she reached the pilot's deck, and after entering another code confirmation, was permitted entry. The door slid open and she could see that the pilot had the craft fired up and was ready to leave.

"All systems are green, ready to return to the nest," said the pilot as the merc nodded, then sat down with a small involuntary groan of pain to strap herself into the chair next to him, prompting the pilot to add, "I have med-bay on alert. They'll be waiting."

The ship's thrusters ignited, and moments later, the craft was streaking up through the troubled atmosphere of Vorhold.

The merc watched as the ship passed through the clouds of the lower atmosphere and into the sparkling void.

Somewhere out there lurked Sword Base, a place where no one had last names and no legacy beyond their deeds, where she would return and wait with the other flawed warriors until the next contract sent them into battle and made them whole once more. Their war with the universe would be unending, that struggle the only peace possible for veterans of such quality, and in that, there was purity.

Jada did not look back as the craft arced over Vorhold on its docking trajectory with the mothership.

It was time to let the Reaper die so that the Dire Sword could be born.

No attachments and no mercy.

The End

9. UNTIL THAT DAY

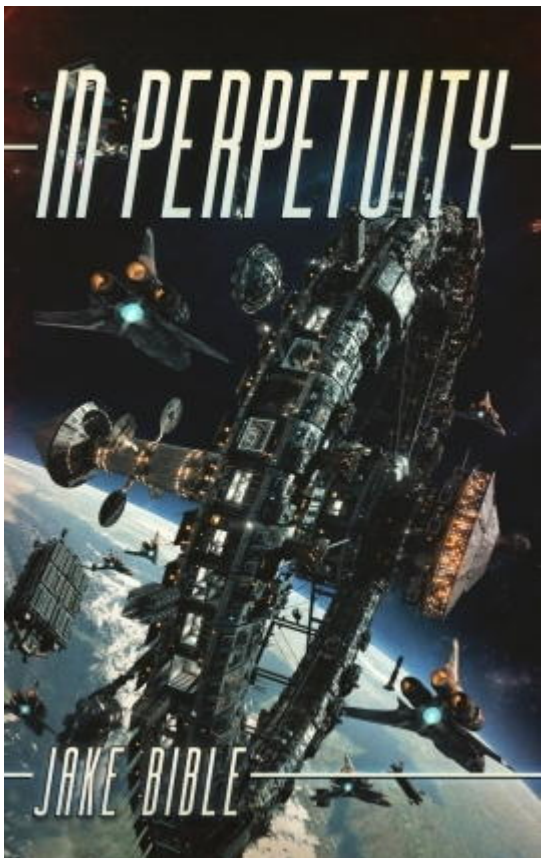
A Note from the Author

Thank you for taking this dark journey alongside the mercenaries of Sword Base, who have played their violent part in the ceaseless wars for profit waged between rival corporations and the gradually unfolding mystery of the Gedra.

After working with real-life military men and women for so long, I wanted to take a stab at responsibly including some elements of PTSD, the motivations of a person who would choose to keep fighting long after the money is no longer an issue, along with exploring the anti-narrative that is the common experience of many soldiers engaging in modern warfare. I hope that my efforts to present such themes, albeit with a heavy sci-fi twist, have been well received and entertaining.

I invite you to continue adventuring with me in an expanded universe as the Necrospace series continues with more stand-alone novels. We will explore the lives and struggles of a variety of characters, some familiar and some brand new, all inter-connected in the great web of commerce and combat that is Necrospace.

Read on for a free sample of *In Perpetuity: A Military Science Fiction Thriller.*



* In Perpetuity contains strong language.

One

"What you are holding in your weak little hands is called an A6 plasma rifle! Also known as a scorcher!" Master Sergeant Lawrence Kim bellowed at the fifty rows of fresh cadets that packed the antechamber to the combat simulator. There were twenty-five cadets per row, but Kim focused his attention on just a handful in front of him. "You will only refer to your rifle as a scorcher! It will not be called an A6! It will not be called a plasma rifle! If I hear any of you motherfucking pieces of shit referring to a scorcher as anything other

than a scorcher, I will personally turn you all into bottoms! Am I understood?"

"Yes, sir!" the cadets yelled.

"Holy fucking moron crap!" Kim yelled. "Did you taint flakes just call me sir? Are you all retarded in ways that had yet to be invented until this very second? Have you never watched a training video in your life? Did you not all just complete your written exams administered by Central Space Command's most dedicated recruitment officers? My name is Master Sergeant Lawrence Kim! You will call me Master Sergeant or you will get my ten foot cock up your ass so fast that I'll be coming from between your gums before you can even register the intense tearing sensation that is your insides! Now, what is my motherfucking name?"

"Master Sergeant Lawrence Kim!" the cadets yelled.

"Jesus jumping on a laser! You are the stupidest motherfuckers I have ever had to train! Did I not just tell you sperm shits to call me Master Sergeant? Did I not just say that?" Kim roared.

He stomped up to a skinny young man, maybe twenty, maybe less, and thrust his chest against the cadet.

"What the fuck is your name, cadet?"

"Cadet Private Carlos DeSuezo!" the young man replied.

"What did I ask to be called, Cadet Private DeSuezo?"

"Master Sergeant!"

"Did you call me that?"

"I did not, Master Sergeant!"

"And why the holy fuck did you not call me by the name I just ordered all of you cunt scrapings to call me by?"

"It was confusing, Master Sergeant!"

"Do you know the difference between a pussy and an asshole, Cadet Private DeSuezo?"

"I do, Master Sergeant!"

"Which do you prefer to ram your itsy bitsy cock into, Cadet Private DeSuezo?"

"I prefer pussy, Master Sergeant!"

"Then would you not be upset if you were to whip out that one inch of yours and find that you are jamming it into a shit-crusted asshole? Would that not upset you, Cadet Private DeSuezo?"

"Yes, that would upset me, Master Sergeant!"

"Then you can understand how I felt when you piss dribbles referred to me by something other than Master Sergeant, can you not Cadet Private DeSuezo?"

"I can, Master Sergeant!"

"So let us try this again, you fucking snot licking, spooge drinkers! What is my name?"

“Master Sergeant!”

“I cannot hear you over the cocks and twats that are jammed in your mouths! WHAT THE FUCK IS MY NAME?”

“MASTER SERGEANT!”

“Very good,” Kim grinned. “That’s exactly what my name is. Now, your job, if your tiny little fucksticks for brains can handle it, is to name your scorcher. Can you handle that, you sphincter nibblers?”

“Yes, Master Sergeant!”

Kim turned and stalked over to a tall woman, close to thirty with shoulder-length brown hair and deep black skin. He shoved himself against her, mashing his muscled chest into her breasts. The woman did not budge, but her bottom lip started to quiver.

“What is the name of your scorcher, cadet private?”

“Master Sergeant?” the woman asked.

“You named your scorcher after me? I would be flattered if it wasn’t so goddamned sad! There are a trillion names out there and you have chosen to name your scorcher after me? Were you born an abortion, cadet private?”

“No, Master Sergeant!”

“Then why did you name your scorcher after me?”

“I did not, Master Sergeant! I was asking a question!”

“I did not hear a question, cadet private, I heard my motherfucking name! Why is your head shoved up your cunt, cadet private? Now, that’s a question!”

“Yes, Master Sergeant!”

“Yes? Yes what, you cum dumpster? At no point did I expect a response from that cock hole you speak with! What is your name, cadet private?”

“Cadet Private Nola Vklogg!”

“Cadet Private Nola Vklogg? You are not from Earth, Cadet Private Nola Vklogg, are you?”

“No, Master Sergeant, I am not!”

“Which piece of shit colony are you from, Cadet Private Nola Vklogg?”

“I am from Grafe, Master Sergeant!”

“Grafe? Grafe! Do you hear that, you pus bag whores? We have a Grafian here!” Kim shoved his face into Cadet Private Vklogg’s, pressing his nose against her nose. “I bet you think you’re better than all of us, don’t you Cadet Private Nola Vklogg? I bet you think you can buy us all out with your riches and make us your slaves, right? When you go to the can, you probably shit diamonds and corphia crystals? Each time you flush, you flush my year’s salary down the shitter. That make you feel special, Cadet Private Nola Vklogg?”

“I do not feel special, Master Sergeant! I am here to serve Central

Space Command and fight against the Estelian threat to Earth and all of her colonies!"

"Is that so?" Kim laughed as he stepped back and looked Cadet Private Vklogg up and down. "A real patriot? Is that what we have here? Don't tell me you volunteered. Please don't tell me that."

Cadet Private Vklogg just stood there.

"Well, I'll be blown by a pack of wiccs," Kim laughed. "You did volunteer! Your parents must be very proud."

Cadet Private Vklogg winced at the mention of her parents.

"Uh-oh," Kim grinned from ear to ear. "I smell trouble in rich people land. Your parents aren't proud, are they? They're actually disappointed that the bribes they paid when you were born went to waste, am I right? All those credits just gone because you want to do your duty and kill doublegangers. They probably won't speak to you anymore, right? Am I right, Cadet Private Vklogg?"

"No, Master Sergeant!"

"I'm sorry, did you just say no?"

"Yes, Master Sergeant!"

"So your parents are speaking to you, Cadet Private Vklogg?"

"No, Master Sergeant! My parents were killed last year during the assault on the Benesheer, Master Sergeant! Along with my entire family! I escaped in a lifepod and was picked up by a CSC cruiser, Master Sergeant!"

"Well, fuck me standing on one leg," Kim nodded. "I have been corrected. Your rich fucking family died while vacationing on the most expensive spaceliner in the galaxy, you escaped with your black skin intact, and now you want to go out and get your tits blown off by doublegangers? Is that what you are telling me?"

"I want to do my duty and kill Estelians, Master Sergeant!"

"You want revenge, is what you want," Kim chuckled. "You know what revenge does to the mind, Cadet Private Vklogg? It warps it! It makes it do stupid things! Like fucking enlist in the CSC corps! That is the stupidest thing I have ever heard! You are a fucking moron, Cadet Private Vklogg! An A-one, prime moron!"

"Yes, Master Sergeant!"

"What is the name of your scorcher, Cadet Private Vklogg?"

"Nastua, Master Sergeant!"

"Was that your mother's name?"

"No, Master Sergeant!"

"Was it your grandmother's name?"

"No, Master Sergeant! It was the name of my baby girl, Master Sergeant! She was vaporized in the nursery during the first wave of the attack!"

"Now you want her to vaporize some doublegangers, is that it?"

“Yes, Master Sergeant!”

“Fucking-A right, you do! Now shut the fuck up and let me deal with these other shitstains! You! The fucking slant-eyed ginger! How in the perfect science of genetics did you end up with slant eyes and curly red hair?”

“Good genes, Master Sergeant!” replied a short young man, looking exactly as Kim described him.

“Do you see my eyes, you little mongrel?”

“Yes, Master Sergeant!”

“Are they slant eyed like yours?”

“Yes, Master Sergeant!”

“Is my hair jet black?”

“Yes, Master Sergeant!”

“That’s because my gene pool hasn’t been pissed in by some Celtic mongoloid! My blood is pure, you fucking freak of nature! Who the fuck let an abomination like you join this elite fighting machine?”

“A recruiter outside of a bar, Master Sergeant!”

“That explains everything then!” Kim yelled. He reached out and grabbed the young man by his curly red hair. “The next time you stand in front of me, I want this red shit shaved off! If you ever desecrate my heritage by showing up with some fucking leprechaun looking hair again, I will let Cadet Private Vklogg take her size twelve boot and insert it up your anus to her ankle, do you fucking hear me?”

“Yes, Master Sergeant!”

“What is the name of your scorcher?”

“Mike, Master Sergeant!”

“Mike? You gave your scorcher a boy’s name? Do you like boys, cadet private?”

“Todd Norlini, Master Sergeant!”

“What did you just fucking say to me?”

“I told you my name, Master Sergeant!”

“Jesus eating crackers, did I ask you for your fucking name?”

“Well, no, Master Sergeant!”

“Well no?” Kim asked. He shook his head. “Drop your trousers and bend over, Cadet Private Norlini.”

“I’m sorry, Master Sergeant?”

“Yes, you are about to be,” Kim smiled. “Cadet Private Vklogg?”

“Yes, Master Sergeant?” Cadet Private Vklogg asked.

“The second Cadet Private Norlini has exposed his anus, I want you to grip his tiny boy hips and shove your boot as far up his ass as you can. Are we understood?”

“Yes, Master Sergeant!” Cadet Private Vklogg replied.

“NORLINI! Why do I not see your brown eye?” Kim roared.

Cadet Private Norlini looked around, but no one would meet his

gaze. He swallowed hard then unbuckled his trousers and let them fall to his ankles.

"Turn and spread them wide, Norlini," Kim chuckled. "Give Cadet Private Vklogg an open shot. Don't make this harder than it has to be."

Cadet Private Norlini slowly turned around, bent over, and spread his ass cheeks. Cadet Private Vklogg hesitated slightly then walked to the man, grabbed him by his hips and lifted her foot.

"Master Sergeant Kim? Combat simulator is now open. Please escort the cadets into the simulator for combat training," a voice said from a speaker above the cadets.

"Well, looks like you have been saved by the voice above, Cadet Private Norlini," Kim laughed. "NOW GET YOUR FUCKING ASSES INTO THAT SIMULATOR BEFORE I SCORCH RAPE EVERY LAST ONE OF YOU!"

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